



Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europa Newsletter

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ABTTTF paid a working visit to Athens and Thessaloniki



The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTTF) paid a working visit to Athens, the capital city of Greece, and Thessaloniki from 28 February to 1 March 2022. ABTTTF President Halit Habip Oğlu held a series of talks for an open and constructive dialogue as part of his working visit, accompanied by Nihan Ayan from the ABTTTF Athens Office.

The problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and the rights violations against it were conveyed and opinions were exchanged with respect to the current developments in Greece

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On Monday, 28 February, the ABTTF delegation met with Petros Konstantinou, President of the Movement United Against Racism and Fascist Threat (KEERFA), Panayote Dimitras, Spokesperson of the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and Board Member of the European Implementation Network (EIN), Theodoros Tsikas, Political Scientist and International Relations Expert and Naim Elghandour,

President of the Muslim Association of Greece in Athens which is the main address for the solution to the problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

On Tuesday, 1 March, the ABTTF delegation moved to Thessaloniki and met there with Prof. Konstantinos Tsitselikis, Executive Board Member of the Hellenic League for Human Rights (HLHR).

During the meetings, where the problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and the rights violations against it were conveyed, there was an exchange of ideas with respect to the discrimination against Muslims and vulnerable groups in Greece along with suggestions on solutions, and the current developments in the country were also discussed.

Situation and issues of the Muslim community in Greece were discussed at ABTTF's programme titled "Facts about our Country"

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) launched its online programme series titled "Facts about our Country" on 10 December 2021.

Anna Stamou, Public Relations Officer of the Muslim Association of Greece, was the guest of the first programme, which was held exclusively at the occasion of the International Human Rights Day and broadcast live. Stamou answered questions posed by Nihan Ayan from ABTTF Athens Office.

Stamou noted that there are two different Muslim communities in Greece, one is the Muslim Turkish community in Western Thrace which has a special status, and the other is the Muslim community with an estimated population of 500,000 throughout Greece. Stamou added that about 80,000 Muslim migrants and asylum seekers live in Greece.

In response to a question about the most important issue of the Muslims in Greece, Stamou indicated that as a non-governmental organisation of the Muslim Union of Greece, they have been striving for equality of all citizens before the law for many years, regardless of religion, and that this is a long and difficult process, adding that the most important problem is the lack of equal laws for all in the country.

Moreover, Stamou noted that Islamophobia is a new phenomenon that has recently emerged and used in Greece and that the Greek state has a new perspective on Muslims in the country, and that they as Muslims demand reconciliation not only at the level of civil society but among all poli-



tical parties in order to speak together, this indeed because racism and hate speech affect not only vulnerable people, but also the whole society and do no one any good.



In response to the question of whether a mosque of 350 people without domes and minarets, converted from an old prefabricated hangar following 14 years of intensive efforts by the Muslim community in Athens was sufficient, Stamou said that she could not regard it as a real mosque because it is an inadequate structure that does not have the characteristic architectural features

that mosques usually have, and that this constitutes an example of the state's view of the Muslim community in the country.

Regarding the Greek Council of State's decision banning the slaughter of animals without them being stunned and which directly concerns the country's Muslim and Jewish communities, Stamou indicated that it was a decision which included a restrictive nature to religious freedom and that she had difficulty understanding the purpose of such a decision.

Finally, underlining that the main issue is the failure to fully integrate Muslims into the society, Stamou noted that the vast majority of the country's political class unfortunately continues to ignore this reality.

You can watch the recording of the programme, which was performed on the Zoom platform and broadcast live simultaneously on ABTTF's YouTube channel and Facebook account, by clicking on the links below in English and Greek:

YouTube English recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_3WL-XTDvY

YouTube Greek recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcgQqj3kA-eY&t=153s>

Facebook English recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/200823965502832>

Facebook Greek recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/2015909678585453>

As long as our voices are heard!

Dear readers,

While we were happy that the pandemic was ending after almost two years, we were shocked when Russia started to invade Ukraine on 24 February.

Since then, the agenda of Europe has been the Russian invasion and the deplorable war in Ukraine.

At a distance of 1500 km from Germany and 1277 km from Greece, the war is taking place in all its bitter reality.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens all of Europe, and we watch this war, which is an open threat to the sovereignty of Ukraine, in amazement.

We see the struggle of a country for its independence.

Of course, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the main agenda item of the entire international community.

We are concerned for the people of Ukraine and our friends living in Ukraine.

We are concerned about the national leader of the Crimean Tatar Turkic people and the Deputy of Ukraine Mustafa Jemilev and his fellow fighters and our friends from other minorities of Ukraine, whom we know through FUEN.

We are deeply concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine in the 21st century.

Under the threat of a third world war, all the men in the country sent their wives and children to the neighbouring countries for their safety.

The men, on the other hand, stayed in Ukraine to defend their country.

Days pass with the worry that urban warfare will begin, and the whole world is experiencing uneasy days.

While the war continues in Europe, of course, life goes on.

As Western Thrace Turks, our struggle for democracy and human rights continues in our country.

After Court of Cassation's rejection of Xanthi Turkish Union's appeal on 29 June 2021 and the following the protest on 10 July 2021, yes, you read it right, an investigation was launched seven months later!

One of the reasons put forward in the opening of the investigation was the alleged failure to comply with the pandemic rules and restrictions at the demonstration!

During my visit to Athens last week, thousands of people marched despite Covid to protest the war in Ukraine.

In addition, the parade of the Xanthi Carnival, which was held in Xanthi between 19 February and 6 March, was held on Sunday 6 March.

But when it comes to us, an investigation is opened seven months after the protest we held in accordance with all the rules.

There is wisdom, there is logic!

Of course, if we are the subject, neither wisdom nor logic works!

The purpose is to scare us, to intimidate us!



But that is not possible!

We also continue our own struggle.

We realised working visits to Athens and Thessaloniki and held a series of meetings.

Then I went to Komotini, where I also had some meetings.

This new year, which we started off fast, goes by very quickly.

When we look at the 2022 plan and that we are now in March, it seems that this year will be quite dynamic and intense.

As long as our voices are heard, we can convince the rulers of our country to solve our problems!

All our efforts are for this!

Yours sincerely,

Halit Habip Oğlu
ABTTF President

ABTTF attended the international seminar titled “Human Rights Violations Faced by Muslims”

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) participated to an international seminar entitled “Human Rights Violations Faced by Muslims” which was organised in cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Turkey and the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on 16-17 February 2022 in Istanbul.

ABTTF President Halit Habip Oğlu and ABTTF International Affairs Director Melek Kirmacı Arık participated to the seminar, which was attended by representatives of the Turkish community in Western Thrace with a large delegation and where human rights violations against Muslims in Europe, Asia and Palestine and proposals for solutions in this respect were discussed.

The problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace were raised in the seminar

Deputy Minister of Justice of the Republic of Turkey Yakup Moğul who realised the opening remarks of the seminar during the inaugural session along with Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey Mustafa Şentop and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu who addressed the participants through video messages, referred to the problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and noted that the Turkish community had been deprived of its basic human rights.

Speaking at the first panel session on the situation of Muslims in Europe, Ibrahim Şerif, President of the Consultative Committee of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace (BTTADK) and Elected Mufti of Rodopi, said that the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece has been granted autonomous status in education and religion according to the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty but that very autonomy had been



taken away from the Turkish community. Şerif stated that the Turkish community in Western Thrace is not allowed to choose its own muftis today, reminding that the Greek state is appointing muftis without prior approval of the Turkish community.

ABTTF and the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) representing the Turkish community in Western Thrace intervened in the part where participants had the opportunity to express themselves. ABTTF explained that there is an institutional and established disc-

rimination against the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece, including in mainstream politics and media. WTMUGA indicated that the Turkish and Muslim identities are inseparable for the Turkish community in Western Thrace and further noted that the muftis who are in the position of being the pioneers of these two identities are targeted.

While the situation of Muslims in Asia was tackled during the second panel session of the seminar, the situation of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories was discussed in the third and final panel sessions.

The two-day seminar, which was attended by OIC officials, IPHRC members, members of the corps diplomatique, experts, academics and representatives of the civil society, ended with the closing remarks.

Western Thrace Turkish delegation attended the UN Forum on Minority Issues

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) and the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) representing the Turkish community in Western Thrace attended the 14th session of the United Nations (UN) Forum on Minority Issues titled "Conflict Prevention and the Protection of the Human Rights of Minorities" organised in a hybrid format on 2-3 December 2021.

ABTTF International Affairs Director Melek Kırmacı Arık and Human Rights Expert Kerem Abdurahimoğlu from WTMUGA attended the Forum where approximately 200 participants were present online, and which was hosted by UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Prof. Fernand de Varennes.

The Forum began with the opening remarks of UN Human Rights Council President Nazhat Shameem Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Prof. Fernand de Varennes and Forum Chair Victoria Donda. In his speech, Special Rapporteur Varennes indicated that



the conflicts around the world have tripled in recent years, underlining the importance of protecting the rights of minorities to prevent conflict in multicultural and multi-ethnic communities.



OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Kairat Abdrakhmanov, Special Adviser to the Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide Alice Nderitu and Nassima Baghli from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation were present at the high-level session of the Forum.

The role of states, international organisations, civil society and minorities in addressing the root causes of conflict at an early stage; the presence of different levels of mechanisms for early prevention of conflicts at the local, national, regional and international levels; practical solutions to the prevention of violent conflicts involving minorities and the role of UN bodies in the prevention of conflicts were discussed during the four thematic sessions of the two-day long Forum.

Speaking at the Forum, The Permanent Mission of Greece to the UN Office at Geneva indicated that Greece had fulfilled all its obligations under the international treaties towards the Muslim minority in (Western)Thrace.

ABTTF's programme entitled "Facts about Our Country" focused on the 39-year legal struggle of the Xanthi Turkish Union

The second programme of the online programme series entitled "Facts about our Country" organised on the Zoom platform by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) was realised on 13 January 2022.

The second guest of the programme, which was broadcast live simultaneously on ABTTF's YouTube channel and Facebook page was Ozan Ahmetoğlu, President of the Xanthi Turkish Union (XTU), the first and oldest association of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, which had been founded in 1927 but was closed due to the word "Turkish" in its name. Ahmetoğlu answered the questions posed by ABTTF International Affairs Director Melek Kırmacı Arık as regards XTU's 39-year legal battle.

Ahmetoğlu noted that in 1983, due to the word "Turkish" in the signboards of the Komotini Turkish Youth Union and the Western Thrace Turkish Teachers' Union, their signboards were taken down together with that of XTU, and that as a result, the 39-year legal battle of XTU began.

In response to the question of why justice is so blind in Greece, which has not executed the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) as regards XTU for nearly 14 years, Ahmetoğlu indicated that the main issue is the failure of Greece to recognise the Turkish identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and that the execution of the ECtHR judgment on it would equal to the recognition of the Turkish identity in the country.



Moreover, Ahmetoğlu stated that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has repeatedly and strongly warned Greece as regards the execution of the ECtHR judgments regarding the Bekir Ousta and Others Group of Cases which includes XTU, the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Rodopi Province and the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association, but that Greece has persistently ignored these warnings and further noted that the House of Macedonian Civilization had won a case at the ECtHR insofar as it had been ruled that Greece had violated the freedom of association but that also that particular judgment has still not been executed. Ahmetoğlu stressed that the Committee of Ministers should take an even tougher stance against Greece from this point on because the issue stems from the distorted democracy in Greece, not the sole execution of the ECtHR judgments and further indicated that as XTU, they had asked the Committee of Ministers to initiate the infringement procedure against Greece.

Finally, in response to the question of how politics, media and public opinion view the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece

and the XTU case in this context, Ahmetoğlu said that the Greek state generally follows a policy of disregard against the Turkish community in Western Thrace, and moreover he noted that as a result of this policy of disregard, the attitude towards the Turkish community in the region was developed based on the argument that there are no Turks in Western Thrace in both the media and politics. Ahmetoğlu noted that as citizens of Greece and the European Union (EU), the Turkish community in Western Thrace desires what is good for its own country and that they have no other demand than to live in a country where the rights and freedoms are respected.

Simultaneously, you can watch the recording of the programme, which is also broadcast live on ABTTF's YouTube channel and Facebook page, by clicking on the links below in English and Turkish:

YouTube Turkish recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-fmj1tXhXM&t=38s>

YouTube English recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5ilmEalWt4&t=2s>

Facebook Turkish recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/3131992687056977>

Facebook English recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/513147203240532>

Human rights cases against Greece before the ECtHR were discussed in the third part of the online programme series entitled 'Facts about Our Country'

The third programme of the online programme series entitled "Facts about our Country" organised on the Zoom platform by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) was realised on 27 January 2022.

The guest of the third programme, moderated by ABTTF International Relations Director Melek Kırmacı Arık, was Panayote Dimitras, spokesperson for the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and a member of the Board of the Strasbourg-based European Implementation Network (EIN). Dimitras answered questions posed by Kırmacı with respect to the state of human rights in Greece and the human rights cases against Greece before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

In response to a question about how he assesses the state of human rights in Greece, including migrants, minorities and other vulnerable groups, Dimitras said that the lack of human rights culture in Greece has even more affected the country's vulnerable groups. Indicating that when democracy was restored in Greece in 1974 that this concerned only the majority, Dimitras noted that democracy remains on hold in the context of the lack of recognition of the ethnic identity for the country's Turkish and Macedonian minorities and that there is a cross-party consensus in the country on this particular issue.

Dimitras further explained that among the cases against Greece before the ECtHR, the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases, which



are comprised of associations of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, constitutes the worst case for Greece, adding that the decision of the Greek Court of Cassation in 2021 had exhausted the long-running legal process initiated by the Xanthi Turkish Union (XTU). Dimitras said that if the Greek Court of Cassation does not change its case-law before the decision of the two other associations in this case group that are the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Rodopi Province and the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association, in two months, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will have to launch the infringement procedure against Greece.

Noting that the ECtHR has twice ruled against Greece in the case regarding the House of Macedonian Civilization of the Macedonian minority, and that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has established a link between this case and the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases, Dimitras noted that if Greece does not execute the ECtHR judgement on the case regarding the House of Macedonian Civilization, the Committee

of Ministers can initiate the infringement procedure for this case, or that the infringement procedure can be initiated by combining it with the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases.

In response to a question about how he considers the illegal pushbacks of the asylum seekers by Greece in the Aegean Sea, Dimitras said that GHM has filed more than 200 cases involving 10,000 victims at the national level, adding that not only pushbacks but people's belongings have been stolen, women have been harassed and asylum seekers have been tortured as punishment. Noting that this practice of torture was more intensely practiced than torture in 1967-1974, Dimitras indicated this is what Greece is doing to protect its borders.

Stressing that there is no human rights culture in Greece, as the head of the United Nations (UN) treaty body who visited the country 20 years ago said, Dimitras said that the Greek authorities should first accept this fact and create an action plan for the development of a culture of human rights.

To watch the entire programme, which was also broadcasted live on ABTTF's YouTube channel and Facebook page:

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv-saZtYOk&t=1s>

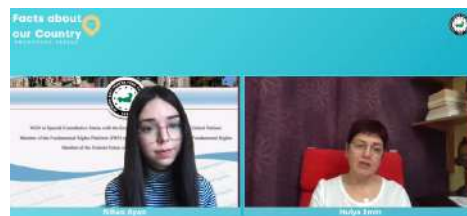
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/463342005486075>

The legal struggle of the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi which has been waiting to be registered for 21 years was discussed in the "Facts about Our Country" programme

The fourth part of the online programme series titled "Facts about Our Country" organised by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) on the Zoom platform was realised on 10 February 2022.

The guest of the fourth programme was Hülya Emin, President of the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi, which has not yet been registered by the national courts despite the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) against Greece. Emin answered the questions of Nihan Ayan from ABTTF Athens Office with respect to the 21-year legal process before the national courts and the ECtHR as regards the failure to register the association.

Emin noted that the aim of the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Ro-



dopi, which was established on 21 March 2001, is to organise women from the Turkish community in Western Thrace under the umbrella of cultural activities and help solve their problems.

Noting that the application made by the association for official registration was rejected by the national courts due to the word "Turkish" in its name, Emin indicated that domestic law was exhausted following the final negative decision of the Court of Cassation on 1 April 2003, after which they applied to the ECtHR in 2005. Fur-

thermore, Emin noted that the judgment of the ECtHR in favour of the association in 2008 which had ruled that Greece had violated Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights as regards freedom of association has not yet been executed by Greece for the past 14 years.

Stating that the appeals made by the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association in the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases whose application for registration were rejected along with their associations on 1 October 2021 and that they had been discussed within the framework of the Court of Cassation, Emin explained that they expected the Court of Cassation to issue a negative decision on their case as the Court of Cassation ruled negatively in June 2021 in the case of the Xanthi Turkish Union (XTU) and that this decision sets a precedent for the other two associations.

Indicating that the fact that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe is following closely and had issued warnings with respect to the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases where associations of the Turkish community in Western Thrace are present is important, Emin stressed that as a result of this, the persistent non-execution of the judgments of the ECtHR regarding this group of cases is not only a problem for Greece, but a situation that harms European democracy as a whole.

Emin noted that the effective and full execution of the ECtHR judgments is also of utmost importance for the European human rights system in terms of renewed commitments on the minority rights, adding that after 14 years of legal struggle, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe should now introduce the infringement procedure against Greece.

Emin underlined that it is tragic that associations that defend women's rights and bring culture to the forefront are not allowed to be registered for 21 years despite the ECtHR judgment, and that it is a great loss for the Turkish minority women living in Western Thrace, further noting that women in Western Thrace, one of the most backward regions of the European Union as regards women's rights, also need support.

Finally, Emin stated that as Western Thrace Turkish women, they demand equality, tolerance and respect from their country Greece and explained that the reality which lives on in Western Thrace should not be perceived as a threat but as a source of wealth and that this reality cannot be changed neither by political pressure nor the negative decisions of the national courts and that they wish these differences to be recognised with respect.

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

YouTube Turkish recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnPr7yx1_Nw&t=112s

YouTube English recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sivTc-AopDY&t=3s>

Facebook Turkish recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/657779462234339>

Facebook English recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/684306322568262>

The issues of the Macedonian minority in Greece were discussed at the 'Facts about our Country' programme

The fifth part of the online programme series titled "Facts about Our Country" of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) was broadcast on 24 February 2022.

The guest of the fifth programme was Eugenia Natsoulidou, founding member of the non-profit organisation (NPO) "Krstev Misirkov (Movement to Promote Macedonian Mother tongue)" of the Macedonian minority in Greece. Natsoulidou answered the questions from the programme's moderator, Nihan Ayan from ABTTF Athens Office, with respect to the issues facing the Macedonian minority, which Greece does not accept and does not recognise.

Natsoulidou noted that the language and culture of the Macedonian minority in Greece are completely different from Greek language and culture, noting that Greece does not recognise any ethnic minorities within its borders because that if it starts to recognise ethnic minorities, the structure based on the assumption that all Greeks came from Ancient Greece would collapse. Natsoulidou added that it is very difficult to change the perception in the country because there is no political will to do so.

Stressing that the most important issues of the Macedonian minority are not officially recognised, and that the minority faced exclusion and was deprived of its citizenship rights that are enshrined in the Constitution of the country, Natsoulidou indicated that when they express Macedonian identity, Greek authorities do not allow it, and that for example, they cannot establish associations promoting local Macedonian traditions or are not allocated space when they want to organise events.

Touching upon the legal process with respect



to the House of Macedonian Civilisation before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), Natsoulidou noted that the application for registration of the association in 1990, which was established by Macedonians living in Florina, was rejected by the Greek courts on the grounds that the Macedonian ethnicity does not exist in the country. Natsoulidou stated that they applied to the ECtHR after the exhaustion of internal legal avenues, and that the ECtHR twice ruled that Greece had violated Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights on the freedom of association.

Moreover, Natsoulidou indicated that the main purpose of "Krstev Misirkov" is to encourage the learning of the Macedonian language, noting that their application for registration in the register of associations within the Greek Ministry of Culture was first accepted but later cancelled. Natsoulidou added that they will reapply to the Ministry of Culture for the registration of their organisation and will take legal action if they receive another rejection response.

Calling on the government to grant and protect the rights of all minorities in Greece, Natsoulidou underscored that the claim made by Greece that there are no ethnic minorities in the country is untrue, stressing that

what the state should do is protect minorities and respect their rights on the basis of international treaties adopted by the Council of Europe and other international organisations.



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

YouTube English recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRMRSREn4SA&t=92s>

YouTube Greek recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1n6Axld4dl&t=30s>

Facebook English recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/529074878514789>

Facebook Greek recording: <https://www.facebook.com/939989616164959/videos/258445379780642>

Petition requesting bilingual minority kindergartens of the Turkish community in Western Thrace discussed at the EP Committee on Petitions

A petition regarding the lack of bilingual minority kindergartens in Western Thrace to provide education in Turkish and Greek (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/petitions/en/petition/content/0058%252F2019/html/Petition-No-0058%252F2019-by-Ozan-Ahmeto%25C4%259F-lu-%2528Greek%2529-on-teaching-Turkish-in-pre-school-education-to-children-belonging-to-the-Turkish-community-in-Western-Thrace>) which had been submitted by President of the Xanthi Turkish Union (XTU) Ozan Ahmetoğlu in 2019 as a pupil's parent and with the initiatives and support of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) within the realm of the European Parliament (EP) was discussed at the European Parliament (EP) Committee on Petitions (PETI) on 10 January 2022.

As the petitioner, Ozan Ahmetoğlu attended the Committee's meeting on 10 January online and realised a presentation on the content of the petition titled "Teaching Turkish in pre-school education to children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace."

Ahmetoğlu stated that his child, who was 5 years old in 2019, had to go to the state kindergarten, where only Greek is taught, when he submitted the petition due to the necessity of pre-school education in Greece under Law No. 3518/2006 and he further noted that all Turkish children in the region are required to attend public kindergartens because Turkish schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace are not allowed to provide pre-school education in their native Turkish language. Ahmetoğlu said that the failure of the Greek authorities to respond positively to the request for kindergartens which would give education in Turkish and Greek just as in the primary schools of the Turkish community in Wes-



tern Thrace caused serious issues for the Turkish children and their parents. Noting that his child would learn the language of his country Greek in an easier fashion if he first was learning his mother tongue Turkish, Ahmetoğlu stressed that the Greek authorities do not provide children from the Turkish community in Western Thrace this possibility as regards pre-school education.

Noting that the Turkish community in Western Thrace enjoys autonomous status in education in accordance with the provisions of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne has the right to open all kinds of schools and use its own mother tongue, Ahmetoğlu further indicated that Turkey's Greek Orthodox minority, whose status and rights are determined in the same way as the Turkish community in Western Thrace has kindergartens where their mother tongue Greek is taught within the framework of their own school systems.



Moreover, Ahmetoğlu stated that the requests of the education company operating in Western Thrace to open a private bilingual kindergarten in Turkish and Greek have been left unanswered by the Greek authorities insofar as the children from the Turkish community in Western Thrace can learn their native

language Turkish and provided education in their mother tongue, adding that Turkish children have no choice but to go to state kindergartens where only an education in Greek is provided.

Ahmetoğlu underlined that all the children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace should not be deprived of the right to learn in their native language Turkish and provided education in their mother tongue, and further requested from his country Greece to establish kindergartens where Turkish children will have education in both Turkish and Greek in accordance with the status of educational autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and within the framework of the minority school system and furthermore demanded for the authorisation to open bilingual special kindergartens in Western Thrace.



Following the presentation of Ahmetoğlu, PETI Vice-Chair Tatjana Ždanoka (Greens/EFA, Latvia) and PETI Members of the European Parliament (MEP) Loránt Vincze (EPP-ED, Romania, President of FUEN - Federal Union of European Nationalities) and Margrete Auken (Greens/EFA, Denmark) supported the petition, recommending for it to remain open.

It was decided at the meeting for the petition submitted by Ahmetoğlu to remain open and be forwarded to the EP Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) for it to express an opinion on the petition.

ABTTF attended the conference on Greece's policy of non-execution of ECtHR judgments organised by the Xanthi Turkish Union

The Xanthi Turkish Union (XTU), the oldest association of the Turkish community in Western Thrace which was founded in 1927 but closed in 1986 by the Greek national courts on grounds of the word 'Turkish' in its name, held an online conference titled "Greece's Policy of Non-Execution of ECtHR Judgments regarding the Turkish Minority in Western Thrace and Other Minorities" on 10 December 2021.

Melek Kırmacı Arık, Director of International Affairs of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), who attended the conference held at the occasion of International Human Rights Day on 10 December delivered a presentation titled "International Dimension in the Legal Struggle of the Xanthi Turkish Union".

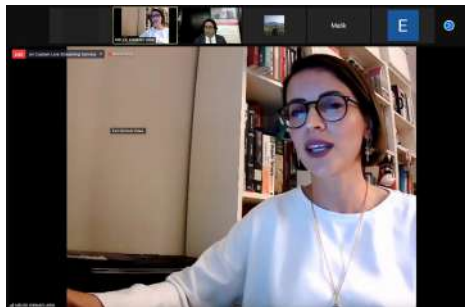
[The violation by Greece of the freedom of association of the Turkish community in Western Thrace was discussed](#)

XTU President Ozan Ahmetoğlu moderated the conference in which the non-execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) by Greece concerning the Turkish community in Western Thrace and the associations of the Macedonian minority living in Greece and the issues caused by it were discussed.

Along with XTU and Lawyers Ahmet Kara and İlker Çavuşoğlu whom are the legal experts of the "Bekir-Ousta and Others



Group of Cases" in which are included the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Rodopi Province and the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association, Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) Spokesman and Board Member of the European Implementation Network (EIN) Panayote Dimitras, Chair of the Friendship Equality and Peace (FEP) Party Çiğdem Asafoğlu, Western Chair of the Human Rights Commission of the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) Pervin Hayrullah, ABTTF International Affairs Director Melek Kırmacı Arık, President of the Rainbow/European Free Alliance and Board Member of the House of Macedonian Civilisation Pavlos Voskopoulos Filipov and Founding Member of the Non-Profit Orga-



nisation "Krstе Misirkov" Eugenia Natsoulidou attended the conference as speakers. XTU President Ozan Ahmetoğlu, who hosted the conference, stated that the XTU, which was closed on grounds of the word "Turkish" in its name, had been fighting legal battles for the past 38 years, noting that Greece had not executed the ECtHR judgments regarding the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases for 13 years, despite the ECtHR condemning Greece for violating its freedom of association with its decisions regarding the Western Thrace Turkish associations and also associations belonging to the Macedonian minority.

In its presentation on the international dimension of the XTU's legal struggle and the role of ABTTF, ABTTF International Relations Director Melek Kırmacı Arık stated that despite the change in legislation in Greece in 2017, the request for the execution of the ECtHR judgment on it by Greece was not accepted. Indicating that Greece has failed the human rights test in this sense, Kırmacı Arık said that it is now the general opinion that the decisions made in this area are political, not legal, and that this is because Greece is treating the issue from a regime point of view. Stressing that the request by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to initiate a procedure for violations against Greece is significant, she added that it is necessary to go one step further in defending rights in a collective way.

*Image: www.gundemgazetesi.com

Action against rights violations and unlawful practices in the field of education from the Turkish community in Western Thrace

ABTTF President: "Our country, Greece, must now listen to the just demands we have made for years so that our children can have a better education, and establish a long-lasting dialogue with our community based on good faith to solve the issues."

The Turkish community in Western Thrace organised an action to draw attention to the issues it has experienced in the field of education and to react to the unilateral viola-



tion of its educational autonomy by Greece. Parents did not send their children to school on 17 December 2021 in a protest organised in Turkish schools across Western Thrace by the decision of the Western Thrace Minority Schools Board Union. The protest, in which the students also boycotted the lessons, took place with a very high participation.

"The Turkish community in Western Thrace has once again defended the future of its children by reacting to the injustices and rights abuses it is facing in the field of education. Our country Greece must now listen to the just demands we have made for years so that our children can have a better education and establish a long-lasting dialogue with our community based on good faith to solve the issues. I once again congratulate our parents and students who have exercised their democratic right and defended their autonomous schools", said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

*Image: www.gundemgazetesi.com

Another biased report from the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs!

ABTTF President: “As ABTTF, we follow not only the international reports but also the national reports. In all reports about our community, instead of others speaking for us, we will speak for ourselves.”

The report of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs titled “Incidents in areas of religious importance in Greece – 2020” details the status of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the field of religion, the right to choose its muftis, the functioning of muftiates and the restructuring of muftiates, and the status of mosques in the region. The report only quotes the official opinion of the state.

Under the heading of the Muslim minority in Thrace, the report states that according to the Lausanne Peace Treaty, the term Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Thrace is used in Istanbul, and that the minority in (Western) Thrace is a religious minority. The report claims that Greece’s religious and cultural character is fully respected by law, along with the status of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

With respect to the mufti offices, the report indicates that the mufti offices in Didymoteicho, Xanthi and Rodopi provinces are at the level of independent general directorates subjected to the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, and that the (appointed) muftis are director at the level of senior civil servants and that are appointed for 10 years and hold religious, administrative and judicial powers according to traditional Islamic law. In addition, the report mentions Presidential Decree No. 52/2019, which represents a clear intervention in the autonomous structure of Turkish community in Western Thrace in the field of religion, and the way the three mufti of-



fices are structured in Western Thrace. Under the heading of Thrace mosques, it is noted that Muslims have fulfilled their religious duties in more than 260 mosques in the region, repeating what was stated in the previous report, and that the demands for the maintenance and repair of old mosques and the construction of new mosques were fulfilled by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. The report further notes that the Ministry of Culture and Sports carried out the restoration of historical mosques, adding that the licenses and regulations for construction permits in places of worship for repairs or expansions in places of worship in Western Thrace have been updated with a circular.



Although it is stated that Greece recognises a Muslim minority according to Lausanne, the report claims that Alevism is independent from Islam under

the heading of Alevis in Thrace and noted that religious ceremonies/worships were temporarily allowed in the Ruşenler Tekke or Syed Ali Sultan Tekke as a result of the application made by the Committee of Thrace Alevi Muslims.

Under the heading of attacks on religious sites, in 2020, it is indicated that the Mastanlı cemetery in Western Thrace, the Old Mosque of Komotini, the Kayalı Mosque of Komotini, the Serdar Mosque in Komotini had faced some attacks and several attacks outside Western Thrace are also included.

“When we examine the report published annually by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, of course, the official opinion is repeated but no explanation is expressed as regards our right to choose our muftis which is usurped by the state and the rights to determine the administrations of our charitable foundations which are taken away by the state in violation of the autonomous structure of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the religious sphere. As such, the report is nothing more than an attempt to create a false, distorted and unrealistic perception that the state provides all rights and freedoms to the Turkish community in Western Thrace in our region. As ABTTF, we will express our views in parallel with this report and report the attacks in our region to the ministry, as we have done in Greece over the last few years, as we report attacks on our places of worship, institutions and organisations in our region. Indeed, as ABTTF, we follow not only the international reports but also the national reports. In all reports about our community, instead of others speaking for us, we will speak for ourselves”, said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

Those who rule Greece continue to ignore the rights abuses suffered by the Turkish community in Western Thrace for years

ABTTF President: “While our country has hijacked our educational autonomy with unilateral policies and practices over the years, closed our primary schools one by one every year on grounds of lack of students and ignored our request for bilingual minority kindergartens, our motherland has opened schools even for only four students in Imbros (Gökçeada) at the request of the Greek Orthodox minority. Currently, education is provided in kindergartens, elementary, middle and high schools belonging to the Greek Orthodox minority in Imbros (Gökçeada). Now I want to ask: is it our country or our motherland that must comply with its obligations arising from the Treaty of Lausanne and international conventions?”



Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis attended the Orthodox Christmas event organised by the Association of the Inhabitants of Gökçeada (Imbros) on 16 January 2022. Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias also sent a message to the event.

In her greeting speech at the event, President Sakellariopoulou expressed hope that the Turkish authorities would change their attitudes towards Turkey's Greek Orthodox minority and implement the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne on the non-Muslim minorities without exception in accordance with international conventions on the protection of human rights. Sakellariopoulou added that Greece will always support efforts to strengthen Hellenism in Imbros (Gökçeada) and address the injustices it has suffered over time.

In his speech, Prime Minister Mitsotakis indicated that the Greek government will always stand by the Greeks

of Imbros (Gökçeada) and urged Turkey to respect the rights of the country's Greek Orthodox minority. Stating that they will press Turkey to respect what it has signed on all international platforms, Mitsotakis said that they will constantly remind Ankara of its official commitments because any discrimination against the Greeks of Imbros (Gökçeada) who are Turkish citizens is a violation not only of the Treaty of Lausanne but also of international conventions on the protection of human rights.

In his message, Minister of Foreign Affairs Dendias urged Turkey to fully implement the Treaty of Lausanne Treaty and respect the rights of the Greek Orthodox minority in Imbros (Gökçeada), Tenedos (Bozcaada) and Istanbul. Dendias, who asked Turkey to comply with international and European standards for respecting the rights of people and minorities, further noted that they will continue to remind Turkey of its commitments at every opportunity and to highlight the injustices suffered

by the Hellenism in Imbros (Gökçeada).

“I read with great surprise the statements of the president, prime minister and foreign minister of our country Greece in a similar context. The most senior executives of our country have once again continued the habit of turning their backs on the facts and expressing an illusion that only they believe in. Our country ignores the Turkish community in Western Thrace which has been granted the same rights as the Greek Orthodox minority in our motherland and considers it a threat and a danger within the framework of reciprocity determined by the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty. It is absurd for our country, which has not executed the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights regarding our associations for nearly 14 years despite all the warnings and calls of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to call on our motherland to comply with its obligations arising from the Treaty of Lausanne and international conventions. While our country has hijacked our educational autonomy with unilateral policies and practices over the years, closed our primary schools one by one every year on grounds of lack of students and ignored our request for bilingual minority kindergartens, our motherland has opened schools even for only four students in Imbros (Gökçeada) at the request of the Greek Orthodox minority. Currently, education is provided in kindergartens, elementary, middle and high schools belonging to the Greek Orthodox minority in Imbros (Gökçeada). Now I want to ask: is it our country or our motherland that must comply with its obligations arising from the Treaty of Lausanne and international conventions?”, said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

*Image: www.defence-point.gr, www.protothema.gr, www.gundemgazetesi.com



An investigation has been launched into the march organized by the Xanthi Turkish Union!

ABTTF President: “The launch of an investigation after 7 months of the democratic march organised by the Xanthi Turkish Union, which has been struggling for 39 years, is a clear continuation of our country’s policies of intimidation and suppression of the Turkish community in Western Thrace. As ABTTF, we will continue to support the Xanthi Turkish Union within the framework of the law as it has done so far in its struggle for rights.”

The Prosecutor’s Office of Xanthi launched an investigation seven months later into a march organised on 10 July 2021 to protest the failure of the execution by Greece of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgment in favour of the Xanthi Turkish Union (XTU), the oldest and first association of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

As part of the investigation, XTU President Ozan Ahmetoğlu was called to testify about the march at the Xanthi Police Station on Wednesday (9 February).



“The launch of an investigation after 7 months of the democratic march organised by the Xanthi Turkish Union, which has been struggling for 39 years, is a clear continuation of our country’s policies of intimidation and suppression of the Turkish community in Western Thrace. The march, in which I personally participated in representing ABTTF and fully supported with all institutions of our

community, took place completely peacefully and in accordance with the rules of law. As claimed in the investigation, the allegation that provocative speeches were made against our country and spread false news is absolutely incompatible with the facts. For 14 years, our country has been politicising a legal issue by not executing the ECtHR judgments regarding the Western Thrace Turkish associations that are against it. As a result of this policy, the Court of Cassation has taken a political decision as regards the restoration of the legal status of the Xanthi Turkish Union, disregard of the principles of democracy and the rule of law. As ABTTF, we will continue to support the Xanthi Turkish Union within the framework of the law as it has done so far in its struggle for rights. We call upon our country to immediately execute the ECtHR judgments regarding our associations by reminding them of their obligations under international law”, 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.

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