

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europa Newsletter

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Western Thrace Turks participated in the FUEN 2019 Congress













President of ABTTF, Halit Habip Oğlu was elected as the Vice President of FUEN for the third time at the FUEN Board of Delegates, held within the framework of the congress where the Turkish community in Western Thrace represented by ABTTF.

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) participated in the 64th annual congress of the Federal Union of the European Nationalities (FUEN), held in Bratislava, capital city of Slovakia, and in the city of Dunajská Streda on 12-16 June 2019. Halit Habip Oğlu, President of ABTTF and Vice President of FUEN, Sami Yusuf, Sebahattin Mümin, Aydın Ahmet and Bülent Çolak, Vice Presidents of ABTTF and Melek Kırmacı Arık, ABTTF International Relations Director participated at the congress in which 70th anniversary of FUEN was celebrated and hosted by the

Hungarian minority and Carpathian Germans in Slovakia.

Halit Habip Oğlu, President of ABTTF has been elected as the Vice President of FUEN for the third time for 2019-2022 period at the FUEN Board of Delegates held within the framework of the congress which was attended by over 200 minority representatives from different countries of Europe. Besides, at the FUEN Board of Delegates, the resolution on the main problems of Turkish community in Western Thrace in education jointly presented by ABTTF, Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) and Friendship Equality Peace Party (FEP) which together represent the Turkish community in Western Thrace under the umbrella of FUEN, was adopted unanimously. And the resolution on the right to learn the mother tongue and education in mother tongue presented by Rhodes, Kos and the Dodecanese Turks Culture and Solidarity Association (ROISDER)

CONTENTS

Western Thrace Turks participated in the FUEN 2019 Congress	
.....	pages 1-2
UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues holds its first regional forum in Brussels	
.....	pages 3-4
ABTTF attended the annual meeting of FUEN Education Working Group	
.....	page 5
Parallel report by ABTTF to the Greece 2018 Human Rights Report	
.....	page 6
The USA 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom on Greece	
.....	pages 7-8
Parallel report by ABTTF on the US 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Greece	
.....	pages 8-9
Final blow on religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace!	
.....	page 10
Mosques in Kos are still kept closed for prayer on the grounds of restoration	
.....	pages 10-11
Western Thrace Turks in Thessaloniki pray at the association building since the mosques are closed for worship	
.....	page 11
Heinous attack to Turkish cemetery in Alexandropolis!	
.....	page 12

representing Rhodes and Kos Turks at the congress was also adopted unanimously.

Turkish community living in Greece was introduced at FUEN traditional "Minority Market"

In the evening of the first day of the congress, a traditional fair called "Minority Market" was organized where cultural and linguistic diversity, traditions and unique cuisines of minorities from different countries of Europe were introduced. At the Minority Market, Bernard Ziesch, Vice President of FUEN, and representatives of the host organizations gave a greeting speech, and the tastes of the Turkish and Greek cuisines of the region were introduced by the Western Thrace and Rhodes-Kos Turks living in Greece. In addition, detailed information was given about the culture and problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and Rhodes-Kos Turks through brochures.

Representatives of Turkic minorities and communities met at the meeting held during the congress

Within the framework of FUEN Congress, FUEN Working Group of Turkic Minorities/Communities (TAG) meeting was held. Representatives of Western Thrace Turks, Rhodes-Kos Turks, Ahiska Turks and Crimean Tatars attended the meeting. At the meeting, organization of the 6th Annual Meeting of FUEN TAG was also discussed, the video explaining the activities and works of FUEN TAG for the period of 2016-2019 prepared by FUEN TAG Secretariat was presented to the participants. To watch the video please refer to <https://www.facebook.com/Federal.Union.of.European.Nationalities/videos/70105279703190/>.

At the congress, FUEN's 70-year struggle of advocating for minority rights was evaluated and the situation of minorities living in Slovakia and Ukraine was addressed

The FUEN 2019 Congress officially started in the afternoon of June 13 with the opening speech of Loránt Vincze, President of FUEN. At this year's congress, FUEN Prize was presented for the first time and Hartmut



Koschyk, Former German Commissioner for Matters Related to Ethnic German Resettlers and National Minorities has been the first to receive the FUEN Prize, awarded to persons who have made a special contribution to dialogue, the protection of national minorities and the coexistence of minorities, language communities and the majority in Europe. Afterwards, the 70-year struggle of FUEN for the protection and promotion of minority rights was evaluated at the panel session organized with the participation of former presidents and the current president of FUEN. FUEN celebrated its 70th anniversary in the evening gala.

At the panel sessions held on June 14th, Friday, past, present and future of the Slovakian Hungarians were discussed and the situation of minorities living in Ukraine-scheduled to host the congress this year but canceled for security reasons-was addressed. On the same day, FUEN introduced its new project, the Minority Monitor (MiMo) for national and local minorities. Within this context, Melek Kırmacı Arık, Director of International Relations who contributed to the project on the right to learn mother tongue in the first phase of the project, on behalf of ABTTF stated that the Turkish community in Western Thrace had reported the issue of bilingual minority kindergartens to FUEN.

The draft resolutions submitted by Western Thrace Turks and the Rhodes and Kos Turks were adopted unanimously

At the FUEN Board of Delegates, the draft resolution on the main problems in education of the Western Thrace Turkish community, presented together with ABTTF, WTMUGA and FEP Party as the "Western Thrace Turkish Minority" delegation, and the

resolution on the right to learn mother tongue and education in mother tongue was adopted unanimously.

ABTTF President Halit Oğlu has been re-elected as FUEN Vice President at the FUEN Board of Delegates

Within the framework of the congress, elections were held for the FUEN Presidium consisted of the chairman and six vice-presidents at the FUEN Delegates Board on Saturday, June 15. At the election total of 221 votes were casted and 2 votes were void. The current president of FUEN, Loránt Vincze, who ran in the presidential elections as the only candidate, received 196 votes and was once again elected as FUEN President for the next three years. In total, 9 candidates competed for the Vice Presidency of FUEN. Halit Habip Oğlu, President of ABTTF and current Vice President of FUEN was elected as the Vice President of FUEN for the third time by receiving the second most votes among the candidates with 170 votes. As a result of the elections, the FUEN Presidential Board was formed as follows: President Loránt Vincze (196 votes), Vice President Daniel Alfreider (180 votes), Vice President; Halit Habip Oğlu (170 votes), Vice President Gösta Toft (153 votes), Vice President Vladimir Ham (127 votes), Vice President Angelika Mlinar (109 votes) and Vice President Bahne Bahnsen (100 votes). The three other candidates for FUEN Vice-Presidency; Meto Novak, Steen Schröder and Gusen Shakhpazov received 89, 61 and 60 respectively.

Number of members of FUEN increased

At the FUEN Board of Delegates, the Confederation of Slovene Organisations belonging to the Slovenian minority living in Italy received ordinary membership of FUEN while the Serbian-Aromanian Association "Lunjina", organization of the Aromanian minority in Serbia and the Democratic Union of Slovaks and Czechs in Romania became associate members of FUEN.

As the ABTTF Presidium, we sincerely congratulate Halit Habip Oğlu on his election as the Vice President of FUEN for the third consecutive year and wish him success in his endeavors.

UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues holds its first regional forum in Brussels

In the regional forum where the right to education of minorities was discussed, the Western Thrace Turks conveyed the problems in the minority schools' education system.

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), participated at the 1st Regional Forum on Minority Issues held on 6-7 May 2019 in Brussels, for the first time, by Prof. Fernand de Varennes, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues. The conference was organized with the support of the Tom Lantos Institute based in Budapest. At the forum where Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) participated also as one of the partner organizations, as representatives of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, Melek Kırmacı Arık, International Relations Director of ABTTF and Aykut Garipoğlu, ABTTF Brussels Office Coordinator attended the forum as well as that Dr. Ali Hüseyinoğlu, Member of Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (BTAYTD) and Faculty Member of the Institute of Balkan Studies at the University of Thrace also participated as a guest speaker at the forum.

ABTTF raised the question of teachers, curriculum and textbooks in bilingual minority kindergartens and primary schools and called the Greek authorities to find solutions for the problems in dialogue with Western Thrace Turks

The regional forum, which provided the opportunity to voice the minorities living in Europe, was attended by approximately 150 people, including



governments, UN mechanisms and bodies, representatives of intergovernmental organizations and civil society organizations in Europe. At the forum that started following the opening speech by Fernand de Varennes who attended the workshop and conference on education organized by ABTTF, BTAYTD, and the Western Thrace Minority Culture and Education Foundation (BAKEŞ) in March 2019 in Komotini, the rights of linguistic minorities in the field of education which one of the thematic priorities of the UN Special Rapporteur, were discussed.

ABTTF took the floor during the first session in which human rights and minority language education were discussed and reminded that the Turkish community in Western Thrace was granted the autonomy in education

in Greece with the 1923 Lausanne Treaty and has the right to education in mother tongue and to establish and manage their own schools. ABTTF also conveyed that after preschool education was made compulsory in 2006 in Greece, the state insistently does not allow the establishment of bilingual minority kindergartens which would provide education as private kindergartens within the scope of the special education system that Western Thrace Turks acquire.

In the second session moderated by Neil Clarke, Director of the Minority Rights Group Europe (MRG Europe) who visited Western Thrace in September 2018, public policy objectives and practices were brought to the agenda. In this session, ABTTF had the floor and said that although Turkish

community in Western Thrace is autonomous in the field of education according to the treaties, state control at all levels of education is very strict. ABTTF stated that the state pursues unilateral and imposing education policies under conditions where there is no dialogue and expressed that rather than solving the problem of low-quality education in Turkish primary schools, steps taken in the public kindergartens within the public school system, such as a minority member in the kindergarten serving as an interpreter, are far from solving the problems.

On the second day where pedagogical approaches in education within the framework of linguistic rights and multilingualism of minorities were addressed, Ali Huseyinoglu made a presentation in the last session entitled the effective implementation of human rights obligations within the framework of quality, resources and management. Hüseyinoğlu who introduced the region and the Turkish community in Western Thrace explained the features of the education system of Western Thrace Turks. Hüseyinoğlu stated that the right to education in mother tongue has a vital importance in terms of maintaining the existence of minorities and conveyed that instead of taking a unilateral step, the decision-making mechanisms should be carried out in dialogue and cooperation with the Turkish community Western Thrace.

ABTTF spoke in the last session and raised the crises in the textbooks in the minority schools and minority schools protests in September 2018 and brought to the agenda the reduction of Turkish lessons in Medrese-i Hayriye in Komotini. ABTTF expressed that practices implemented with an unilateral and compelling understanding by Greek authorities created mistrust and called the Greek authorities to bring solutions to the problems in cooperation with the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

Representatives of Cham Albanians and



Vlahs who attended the forum stated that Greece only recognizes the religious minorities in the country and criticised Greece for not recognizing any ethnic or national or linguistic minority and expressed that they do not have right to education in mother tongue since these minorities are not recognized.

Greece had the floor in different sessions and indicated that according to the Treaty of Lausanne, there is only Muslim

minority in Western Thrace and repeated its official opinion that this Muslim minority is composed of three different ethnic groups. Greece stated that Turkish community Western Thrace has an autonomous structure within its school system and Greece has taken positive steps like issuing new textbooks, new curriculum as well as the establishment of a new department to train the minority teachers serving in the Turkish programme.

ABTTF attended the annual meeting of FUEN Education Working Group

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) participated at the annual meeting of the Education Working Group of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), held on 6-8 May 2019 at the European Committee of the Regions in Brussels. At the meeting held in parallel to the first European Regional Forum on Minority Issues organised by Fernand de Varennes, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues with the support of the Tom Lantos Institute on 6-7 May 2019 in Brussels, ABTTF conveyed the problems experienced in education and the work carried out on education throughout the year to the representatives of other FUEN member minority organisations in Europe.

During the first session of the meeting, which was chaired by Olga Martens, FUEN Vice President and attended by Loránt Vincze on the first day, FUEN President, FUEN's general country reports on educational situation of minorities in Europe were conveyed to the participants and educational projects were introduced under the heading pedagogical approaches on minority language education and teaching minority languages and culture. On the second day of the meeting, FUEN's recommendations in the field of education to be presented to the European Commission within the framework of the European Citizens' Initiative namely "Minority SafePack Initiative (MSPI)" were conveyed.

Violation of the educational autonomy of the Turkish community of Western Thrace and student protests in the region were brought to the agenda

In the first session of the annual meeting



of the FUEN Education Working Group, country reports about the problems faced by some minorities in Europe, including the Turkish community in Western Thrace presented by FUEN which highlighted the wide-ranging control of Greece on minority schools, lack of teachers, materials and primarily the textbooks and the decline in the number of minority schools. Following the presentation of the country reports, Zora Popava from European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), provided information about the project "Teach-D-Teaching in Diversity"-an Erasmus + Project- under the title of pedagogical approaches on minority language education and teaching minority languages and culture and she also shared with the participants the contents of the online trainings prepared for the teachers about minority education on the website created within the scope of the project. Dr. Adelheid Manz from Institute for National and Foreign Languages in Baja, Hungary, presented the results of the survey conducted among teachers serving at Hungarian state kindergartens within the scope of research project on nationalism at kindergarten level in Hungary.

On the last day of the working group meeting, in the session moderated by FUEN Political Advisor Johan Häggman, European Citizens' Initiative, "Minority SafePack Initiative (MSPI)"

which succeeded by FUEN through collecting 1 million signatures and recommendations to promote the linguistic diversity were addressed. Péter Varga, Diplomat responsible for minority issues at the Permanent Representation of Hungary to the EU, made a presentation at the session and gave information on the establishment of a European Centre for Cultural and Linguistic Diversity-one of the recommendations among MSPI- and possible tasks of the centre. ABTTF had the floor in this session and gave information about the protests of the minority schools in Western Thrace and the protests of Medrese-i Hayriye in Komotini organised last year with the demand for renewal of textbooks in minority schools and against the reduction of Turkish lessons.

ABTTF drew attention to the fact that decisions violating the educational autonomy of Turkish community in Western Thrace have been taken by Greece without the approval of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and underlined the importance of the solutions to be presented within the framework of MSPI for the solution of educational problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace. The meeting ended after the evaluation and presentation of proposals by the participants.

Parallel report by ABTTF to the Greece 2018 Human Rights Report

In its parallel report, ABTTF expressed the injustices and problems experienced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) has prepared a parallel report in response to the statements related to the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the Greece 2018 Human Rights Report published by the Department of State of the United States of America. In its parallel report submitted to the US authorities, ABTTF gave detailed information on the issues related to the Turkish community in Western Thrace and reported on current developments which are not covered in the US report.

In its parallel report, ABTTF underlined that the Greece does not recognize the ethnic Turkish identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and stated that today, there is no official association with a Turkish name registered by local courts in Greece. ABTTF noted that Greece has not yet implemented judgements of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) regarding the Xanthi Turkish Union, Turkish Women in the Prefecture of Rodopi and Evros Minority Youth Association even though more than ten years have passed after the judgements. ABTTF also highlighted that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe follows closely the implementation of the ECtHR judgements on the so-called “Bekir Ousta Group Cases” and provided information in detail about the ongoing legal process at the national Greek courts.

Regarding the issues on education, ABTTF stated that the autonomy of



education of the Turkish community in Western Thrace which was guaranteed by the treaties has been undermined by the Greek government's policies and laws in the last years. In its report, ABTTF added that bilingual minority primary schools were closed on the grounds of economic reasons and the number of minority primary schools which was 194 in 2008 has decreased to 128 in 2018. ABTTF indicated that there are no bilingual minority kindergartens where children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace could learn Turkish in early childhood and that the Greek government ignores the demands of the Turkish community in Western Thrace to open bilingual minority kindergartens in Turkish and Greek languages in the region. By calling on Greece to return the autonomy of education of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, ABTTF demanded the opening of the Turkish-Greek bilingual minority kindergartens

within the minority education system.

In its parallel report, ABTTF noted that the prosecutions aiming to intimidate and suppress the representatives and notables of the Turkish community in Western Thrace continued in 2018 and informed that a lawsuit was filed against İbrahim Şerif, elected Mufti of Rodopi on the grounds of usurping “the Mufti office”.

Regarding freedom of religion, ABTTF reminded that the Turkish community in Western Thrace was granted the right to choose their own religious leaders through the 1940 Athens Treaty and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and explained that Greece still does not recognize the Muftis elected by the Turkish community in Western Thrace. Furthermore, ABTTF stated that the law adopted at the Greek Parliament in January 2018 which renders the sharia powers used by the Muftis in the field of family and heritage optional, is another step towards abolishing the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

You may access Greece 2018 Human Rights Report published by the United States Department of State at the following link:
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/289379.pdf>

The USA 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom on Greece



Halit Habip Oğlu: “In the part on Greece within U.S report, the problems in the field of religion faced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace are again covered incompletely and superficially. Like in previous years, as ABTTF, we will present in detail the views and demands of the Turkish community in Western Thrace regarding the themes of the report by preparing a parallel report.”

The U.S Department of State published the 2018 International Religious Freedom Report covering the period January 1 to December 31, 2018. In the report where the status of religious freedom in all countries of the world is elaborated, the part related to Greece covers partially the problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace with the definition “Muslim minority in Thrace”

The Turkish community in Western Thrace Turkish in the U.S report on Greece

In the U.S report which stated that

Greece's population was estimated to be 10.8 million as of July 2018, it is claimed that the population of the Turkish community in Western Thrace - officially recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923- is 100,000, referring to the work of the Pew Research Center. However, in the 2017 report, it was noted that the population was between 100 and 120 thousand.

As mentioned in the 2017 report, this year's report states that the Turkish community in Western Thrace has the right to manage mosques and foundations in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923, and that the salaries of Greek Orthodox priests and the appointed Muftis as well as imams in Western Thrace are paid by the Greek government.

The report states that the law adopted by the Greek Parliament in January 2018 grants the members of the Turkish community in Western Thrace the right to choose either the Greek courts or the Muftis (appointed) in the field of family and inheritance law. Moreover, it is claimed that by the law 1991, the Greek government has the authority to appoint three Muftis with tenure of ten years in Western Thrace in consultation with a committee consisted of Muslim leaders.

In the report, it is indicated that the Greek government continues to appoint Muftis due to the sharia powers, whereas the Turkish community in Western Thrace opposes this practice and demands that the Muftis are elected directly by the Western Thrace Turks. Nevertheless, the report does not address the Presidential Decree which is totally opposed by the Turkish community in Western Thrace and foresees the restructuring of the autonomous Mufti structures in Western Thrace as well as affiliating them to the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and transforming them into an ordinary government office.

The U.S report states that there are 5 quotas per thousand for the members of the Turkish community in Western Thrace for their admission to the university and public institutions. In the report, it is also noted that there are 148 bilingual schools (in real there are 128) and two madrasas, providing education in Greek and Turkish language in Western Thrace and the Muslim children could go to the Koran courses at mosques after school if they wish. However, the report does not include the “240 Imam Law” and the criticism from the Turkish community in Western

Thrace regarding teaching Islamic religious course in Greek language in public schools.

Halit Habip Ođlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), said: "The USA 2018 International Religious Freedoms Report on Greece covers partially the problems of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the field of religion. However, we observe that the criticism from the Turkish community in Western Thrace has been given much less attention in recent years and that the official opinion of the Greek government has been repeated. For example, the



Western Thrace Turkish community's criticism of the 240 Imam Law and judicial prosecutions against our elected Muftis on the grounds of usurpation of the Mufti offices to intimidate our Muftis

are not mentioned in the report at all. As ABTTF, we will not give up our persistent and determined activity. As in previous years, we will prepare a parallel report and convey the details and opinions of the Turkish community in Western Thrace on the themes in the US report."

To read the whole text of the part on Greece in the USA 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom, please click on the following link: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/GREECE-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

Parallel report by ABTTF on the US 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Greece

In its parallel report, ABTTF cited Greece's problems in the area of religious freedom of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and called on Greece to stop immediately interfering with the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and to fully respect its religious freedom.

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) drafted a parallel report in response to 2018 Report of United States (US) Department of State on International Religious Freedom: Greece, which was announced on June 21, 2019 and forwarded it to the US authorities. In the parallel report by the ABTTF, the Mufti issue and foundations belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace who has religious autonomy pursuant to the international treaties, and the "240 Imam Law" were mentioned in detail in the scope of religious freedom.

In its parallel report, ABTTF responded to the claim that the population of the



Turkish community in Western Thrace was estimated at roughly 100-120 thousand in the last year US report by referring the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and it was estimated at roughly 100 thousand in this year's report by referring

to a study by the Pew Research Center. Therefore, ABTTF criticized the US Department of State for showing a different source each year and announcing the population of the Turkish community in Western Thrace low which is indeed 150,000 although there is no

official census or data of ethnic origin in Greece.

ABTTF stated that although the Turkish community in Western Thrace has the right to choose their own religious leaders, Muftis, according to the 1913 Treaty of Athens and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the Greek government has been appointing the Muftis or Mufti regents since 1991. ABTTF highlighted that Western Thrace Turks who oppose to the appointment of Muftis by the state and elect their own Muftis however those Muftis are not recognized by the Greek government. ABTTF also noted that Ibrahim Şerif, elected Mufti of Rodopi has been constantly subjected to judicial proceedings in recent years on the grounds that “he usurped the Mufti office” and used illegally the religious symbols.

In its parallel report, ABTTF also provided information about the Presidential decree 52/2019 entered into force on June 11, 2019, which introduces the restructure of autonomous Mufti offices in Western Thrace, and emphasized that by the decree, the Mufti offices has been fully affiliated to the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. ABTTF added that the decree transformed Mufti offices into ordinary state offices and the decree which significantly limited the powers of the Muftis finally abolished the religious autonomy of Turkish community in Western Thrace.

ABTTF underlined that the “240 Imam Law” No. 4115/2013 has been still in force and applied insistently by the Greek government despite all the objections by the Turkish community in Western Thrace. ABTTF also noted that Islamic religious instructors are required to be appointed to teach Islam to the children belonging to the Turkish community in Greek-language public primary and secondary schools and mosques in Western Thrace under the auspices of the government-appointed muftis. ABTTF added that the Ministry of



Education and Religious Affairs released a decision in June 2019 which requires the appointment of 120 religion teachers (ierodidaskalos) to work in Western Thrace under a 9-month employment contract.

In its parallel report, ABTTF also touched upon the problems experienced for decades related to the foundations belonging to Turkish community in Western Thrace and noted that although 1923 Treaty of Lausanne granted the Turkish community in Western Thrace the right to establish, manage and control its own religious institutions, the Greek government did not allow the executive boards of the foundations to be elected by Western Turkish community and since 1967 when the military junta came to power, the Greek government has been appointing the executive boards. ABTTF also noted although by the law 3554/2007, foundations belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace were exempted from tax, the aforementioned

law has not been applied to date and the tax debts of the foundations have not been cleared hence the foundation property is under mortgage due to non-deleted tax debts.

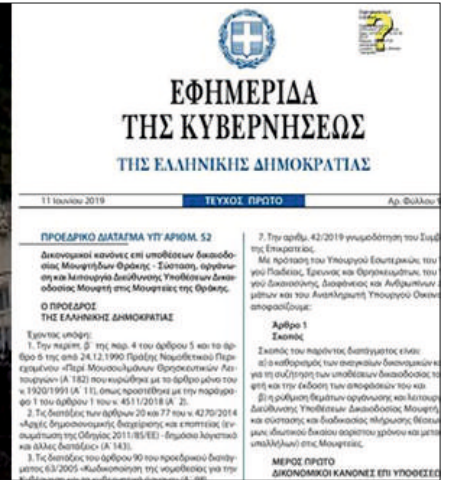
ABTTF reminded that unilateral steps of the Greek government regarding the Muftis are a violation of the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and called on Greece to restore the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace guaranteed by the international treaties. In addition, ABTTF criticized the US, which included the problems of Western Thrace Turks in the religious field into the report from the Greek point of view based on official policy and claims of the Greek state, and asked from US diplomatic representatives and officials to meet with the Western Thrace Turks and draft the report with more balanced and objective approach by covering the views of the Western Thrace Turks more in the report.

Final blow on religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace!

Halit Habip Oğlu: “As the Turkish community in Western Thrace, it is not possible for us to accept the recent presidential decree prepared and put into force by the Greek state without taking into consideration our demands which harbors the intention to take away our mufti offices!”

The presidential decree, which envisages the restructuring of the mufti offices in Komotini, Xanthi and Didymoticho in Western Thrace region of Greece, was adopted and entered into force on 11 June 2019. With the decree No. 52/2019, the mufti offices of the Turkish community in Western Thrace are completely affiliated to the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs and transformed into an ordinary government office. The decree consisted of 26 articles, envisages the appointment of the personnel to be employed at the mufti offices by the ministry and quite limits the muftis' powers.

Regarding the issue, Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) said: “Our country Greece, which has not been recognizing the muftis we have



electd for years, has done what it always does regarding the issues directly related to the Turkish community in Western Thrace and has enacted the presidential decree without consulting with us which includes regulations pertinent to our muftis. The Presidential Decree No. 52/2019, which affiliates our mufti offices to the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, is contrary to the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty which guarantees the right of the Turkish community in Western Thrace to establish and manage its religious institutions as well as to the international law documents on freedom of religion. With the recent presidential decree which transforms our mufti offices into an ordinary government office and aims to turn our muftis into a puppet of the

Greek state by taking away their powers, the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace guaranteed by international treaties has been completely abolished and its religious freedom has been openly violated. As the Turkish community in Western Thrace, it is not possible for us to accept this decree prepared and put into force without taking into consideration our demands which harbors the intention to take away our mufti offices. The Turkish community in Western Thrace is determined to act in unity and solidarity with its all institutions and organizations against this decree within the framework of democracy and law.”

*Photo: www.gundemgazetesi.com

Mosques in Kos are still kept closed for prayer on the grounds of restoration

Halit Habip Oğlu: “We demand from our country Greece to protect and restore the mosques built in the Ottoman period in Kos as soon as possible since it is a part of its cultural heritage and to respect the freedom of religion of Turkish community living on the island.”



Defterdar Haci Ibrahim Efendi Mosque located in the center of Kos island and Gazi Hasan Pasha Mosque in the village of Germe which were damaged as a result of the earthquake in July 2017 in Greece were closed for worship on the grounds of restoration. However, the restoration of the two mosques by the Greek authorities has not yet been

completed. Recently, the 34-acre land belonging to the Muslim Turkish Foundation of Kos was sold to a touristic company by the appointed execution board of the foundation on the pretext of providing financial resources for repairing of the mosques on the island. There is currently no mosque open where the Turkish community in Kos can pray.



were damaged in the earthquake in 2017. Even though necessary permits have been obtained from the Greek authorities, the restoration work has not started yet for two years. This raises questions in mind that the restoration has been deliberately delayed. Delaying the restoration violates the freedom of religion of the Turkish community in Kos. On the other hand, under the pretext of maintenance, the immovables belonging to the Muslim Turkish

Foundation of Kos are sold by the executive board of the foundation. While Greece takes an active role in conservation of cultural heritage in the world through making an effort globally, on the contrary it does not fulfill its responsibilities and obligations by not preserving the historical monuments within its borders as in the case of mosques in Kos. We demand from our country Greece to protect and restore the mosques built in the Ottoman period in Kos as soon as possible since it is a part of its cultural heritage and to respect the freedom of religion of Turkish community living on the island.”

*Photo:

<http://www.birlikgazetesi.net/haberler/13062>

Halit Habip Ođlu, President of Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) made a statement about the issue and said: “Defterdar Hacı İbrahim Efendi Mosque and Gazi Hasan Pasha Mosque, which used to be open for prayer on the island of Kos, have been closed by the Greek authorities on the grounds that they

Western Thrace Turks in Thessaloniki pray at the association building since the mosques are closed for worship

Halit Habip Ođlu: “Greek authorities prevent Western Thrace Turks from worshipping freely by keeping the Ottoman heritage mosques closed for worship.”



Western Thrace Turks living in Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city after Athens, have to pray at the building of the Education and Culture Association of Muslims in Macedonia and Thrace because Greek authorities do not allow the mosques there to be opened for worship. Western Thrace Turks have been praying on the carpet they laid on the floor after moving the chairs and tables out in the association building since the closure of the masjid operating inside the association they founded in 2005 upon the order of the prosecutor's office in 2017 on grounds that it is unauthorized.

Education and Culture Association of Muslims in Macedonia and Thrace and they give religious education and teach Kur'an to Turkish children.

The Greek authorities do not allow worshipping at Hamza Bey Mosque, Hortacı Süleyman Efendi Mosque, Yeni Mosque and Alaca İmaret Mosque, which are reminiscent of the Ottoman period in Thessaloniki. Although the Education and Culture Association of Muslims in Macedonia and Thrace has repeatedly appealed to the Greek authorities to allocate one of the mosques for worship, it has not received a positive response to date.

The imams, appointed by the Muftis elected by the Turkish community in Western Thrace, go to Thessaloniki from the Western Thrace region every week and perform Friday prayer at the building of the

Halit Habip Ođlu, President of the

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe(ABTTF), explained: “Our country, which is member of the European Union and claims to be the cradle of democracy, has not permitted Western Thrace Turks living in Thessaloniki to perform the Ramadan Feast prayer at the Hamza Bey Mosque, Hortacı Süleyman Efendi Mosque, Yeni Mosque and Alaca İmaret Mosque -reminiscent of the Ottoman period- hence they had to perform their prayer at the building of the Education and Culture Association of Muslims in Macedonia and Thrace that has a limited capacity. The congregation overflowed to the street. The new mosque, allowed to be built in the capital Athens after many years, was opened for worship only recently, but it is evident that its capacity is insufficient for the Muslim community in Athens. We call on our country Greece to fully respect the freedom of religion and worship and to fulfill its obligations in this field as a democratic state.”

*Photo: www.haberler.com



Heinous attack to Turkish cemetery in Alexandropolis!

Halit Habip Oğlu: “We severely condemn this heinous attack made to our cemetery, as the Turkish community in Western Thrace, we are not deceived by such provocations which has got several examples from the past and we want it is known that we will continue our rightful struggle within the scope of democracy and principles of the universal law till the end.”

On 28 May 2019, an attack was carried out by unknown assailant or assailants to the Turkish cemetery in Alexandropolis, one of the three cities in Greece where the Turkish community Western Thrace has been dwelling. Tombstones were damaged during the attack in which the perpetrators are considered to be the sympathizers of extreme rightist Golden Dawn Party. The assailants broke some of the tombstones and drew the logo of the Golden Dawn Party on the tombstones with spray paint and wrote “Stohos” the name of a group known to be a turcophobe. Besides, assailants left a following statement “Greece belongs to



Greeks” with the logo of the Golden Dawn Party.

Regarding the attack Halit Habip Oğlu, President of Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) made the following statement “As ABTTF, representative of Western Thrace Turks living in Europe, we severely condemn the heinous attack made to the Turkish cemetery in Alexandroupolis. It is not possible that we accept this attack which is hatred based, racist and has turcophobic motives and where the tombstones were damaged. Assailants have pointed the Turkish community in Western Thrace as a target and wanted to create intimidation. It is very thought-provoking that the attack has taken place

following the victory of the Friendship, Equality, Peace Party which has received the majority of the votes in the provinces of Rodopi and Xanthi at the European Parliament elections held on 26 May in Greece and this attack had an intention of provocation. We ask the perpetrators to be identified by the police at the soonest and brought to trial. As the Turkish community in Western Thrace, we should not be deceived by such provocations which has got several examples from the past, we should stay calm and continue our rightful struggle within the scope of democracy and principles of the universal law.”

*Photo: www.gundemgazetesi.com

ABTTF Newsletter

The ABTTF Newsletter in four languages, namely in Turkish, English, Greek and German, is celebrating its 15th year.

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

To have more information on subscription to the ABTTF Newsletter, please do not hesitate to contact us.

ABTTF

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