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Föderation der West-Thrakien Türken in Europa
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Ευρωπαϊκή Ομοσπονδία Τούρκων Δυτικής Θράκης
Fédération des Turcs de Thrace Occidentale en Europe

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

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Agenda Item II: Human rights and minority language education

Dear Moderator,
Distinguished representatives, delegates and NGO representatives,

During the first European Regional Forum on Minority Issues held in Brussels on 6-7 May 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur Prof. Varennes stressed that the issue of education as a human right and its impact for minorities constitutes one of his thematic priorities of the Special Rapporteur and underlined the importance of education in, and teaching of, minority languages.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Prof. Fernand de Varennes referred at the international conference organized by the civil society representatives of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Komotini, in co-operation the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), on 2 March 2019, that the UN Handbook on "Language Rights of Linguistic Minorities: A Practical Guide for Implementation" notes that establishment and operation of private schools and educational services using minority languages as a medium of instruction should be allowed, recognized and even facilitated and legislation must clearly allow the establishment and operation of private schools teaching minorities in their own language.

With the 1923 Lausanne Treaty which granted official minority status to the Turkish community of Western Thrace, the Turkish community has right to education in its native language and autonomy in the management of its educational institutions. However, Greece does not recognize the ethnic identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and recognizes only one minority, the Muslim religious minority in Western Thrace, as Gay McDougall, the former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, reported in her report following her mission to Greece in 2008.

The report by the Minority Rights Group Europe (MRGE) on "The Turkish Minority in Western Thrace: The Long Struggle for Rights and Recognition" released on 23 October 2019 notes that the continued non-recognition of the Turkish community's collective ethnic identity has many implications, including lack of access to education in their own language¹.

As MRGE report notes that the autonomous status of minority schools granted by the Treaty of

¹ https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MRG_Rep_WThrace_EN_Sept19.pdf

Lausanne has been significantly weakened by numerous legislative acts and ministerial decisions. In education, minority schools in the Western Thrace region have obtained a hybrid semi-private and semi-public legal character over the years. This special education system with complex legal provisions which governs their establishment and operation are registered as private schools, but they are under the direct control of the state. A latest example of state intervention to the minority schooling system is that the Land Office did not approve the declaration on the Turkish minority primary school by the board of trustees in Çepelli(Mishos) village, while other 24 properties were approved, although the minority schools in minority villages are property of the legal pious foundation(waqf) in villages with a special right to administer and manage in their own language. Previously, the Municipality of İnhanlı (Töpiros) in Xanthi sent a letter to minority primary schools within its borders and asked the transfer of the property right to the municipality in order to make renovations at these schools. These recent examples raised concerns of the Turkish community that the government might seek to transfer of the property rights of minority schools in villages to the state.

One of the alarming problems in education in, and teaching of minority languages is the lack of pre-schools in mother tongue in Western Thrace. Minority children are obliged to attend public kindergartens where the instruction is only in Greek under Law 3518/2006 which extends the compulsory period. However, extension of compulsory education period does not include minority schooling system. Therefore, there are no minority/private kindergartens or minority/private nurseries for the minority children to learn their mother tongue in their early childhood.

The Government of Greece has rejected proposals to open Turkish-Greek bilingual kindergartens in the existing bilingual Turkish minority primary schools, despite many applications by the community organizations for establishment of bilingual kindergartens within the special education system and establishment of other private bilingual kindergartens in the region.

The right not to be discriminated is violated because the Greek government, fails, without an objective and reasonable justification to treat differently Turkish children who speak a different language other than Greek. Bilingual education would allow better knowledge of both Turkish and Greek from an early age and enable greater choice of whether to go to minority or Greek public primary school. Due to the persistent lack of bilingual minority kindergartens, parents send their children to Greek-language state kindergartens despite the risk of losing their linguistic and cultural identity, where the medium of instruction is only Greek.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe (ECRI) mentioned in its fifth report on Greece in 2015 that there are no special measures for the minority. ECRI stressed that children's right to schooling should not be jeopardized and further recommended that the authorities should take all necessary steps to ensure that minority children have access to a bilingual or monolingual elementary school, as per their parents' choice.

Rather, the Ministry of Education started in 2017 a pilot project which envisages a bilingual minority member, graduated from one of the higher education institutions in Greece, to work with a teacher in a kindergarten class in public schools in villages where children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace reside. This is, however, not a bilingual pre-school education. Besides, a bilingual minority member would not work in the class as a mother tongue teacher, but as an interpreter for the Greek teacher. Therefore, ABTTF urges Greek authorities to establish bilingual Turkish minority kindergartens in region in line with the minority schooling system and allow the Turkish community in Western Thrace to establish private kindergartens where the language of education will be Turkish and Greek.

At the national level, there are no inclusive policies and awareness-raising programs that promote tolerance and mutual understanding between the Turkish community and governmental authorities. Besides, are no educational programs and partnerships with civil society representing the Turkish

community in Western Thrace as a means to address negative stereotyping and stigmatization in education. Negative portrayal of the ethnic "other", i.e. the Turks, abound in history textbooks. Racism, xenophobia, intolerance and prejudice in Greek education continue and there are no provisions for encouraging diversity in education and for teacher training in diversity management.

MRGE recommends to Greek authorities to guarantee, in line with international guidelines, preschool education in the mother tongue of the minority and ensure that most of the subjects in primary and secondary schools are taught in minority language alongside the Greek language. MRGE warns Greek authorities that that educational programmes aiming to improve the Greek language skills of minority students continue, but not at the expense of improving minority language education.

ABTTF requests from the Greek Government to make good use of all available domestic and international instruments including advisory and consultative bodies in order to address problems in minority issues.

