



Human Rights Council  
Forum on Minority Issues  
Eleventh Session  
29 – 30 November 2018

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Agenda Item 4: Ensuring the right to a nationality for persons belonging to minorities through facilitation of birth registration, naturalization and citizenship for stateless minorities

Living as stateless in Greece: The plight of the Muslim Turkish minority members who suffered from ex-Article 19 of Greek Citizenship Code

Muslim Turks of Western Thrace, one of the autochthonous national minorities in Europe, have been living on their own lands for centuries. After the Ottoman administration across the Balkans came to an end in the 1920s, Western Thrace became a part of Greece as a result of which they became citizens of Greece.

Starting from the 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne as of this day, this historical minority group has been facing a variety of old and new problems regarding the continuity of their survival in Western Thrace. Statelessness as a result of denationalization has become one of those issues since the introduction of Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship Code: "A person of non-Greek ethnic origin leaving Greece without the intention of returning may be declared as having lost Greek nationality." After many criticisms at local, national and international level this race-motivated discriminatory measure was eventually abolished in 1998. However, it was not repealed retroactively as a result of which no solution was found by Greece to the plight of around 60.000 people!

On the one hand, many of those who lost their citizenship when they were abroad had actually been given no right to enter Greece given that they lost their citizenship. On the other hand, the ones who were stripped of Greek citizenship without leaving the country turned into stateless people on their own historical lands. They kept living in Greece as 'living ghosts' of the country. Practically, they were a part of the Muslim Turkish minority but they were legally non-existent. They had almost no fundamental right since they had no legal identity in the country. They lost their social rights as well. They could not own, buy or sell anything nor they could register their children. In fact, Greece acceded to the 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and tried to implement some of its provisions. Yet, they lagged far behind than satisfying even basic human needs of the stateless Muslim Turks in Western Thrace. As a result, they were never given another option by Greek authorities than living a segregated life for decades by excluding themselves from political, economic and social life of the Minority.

No official figures have ever been stated by Greece regarding the total number of stateless people, victims of Article 19, living within the boundaries of the country. Since its abolition in 1998, many of those stateless Turks residing in Western Thrace have finally been given citizenship. It is estimated that only a few of them have not obtained Greek citizenship yet. However, no compensation has ever been paid by Greece to those stateless people who lost their citizenship. Nor Greece apologized about the plight of those Greek citizens who lost their citizenship under Article 19 without having any intention to do so. Stateless Turks of Western Thrace had no right to own any moveable or immovable property, no chance to do business as well. They were non-existent in theory but not in practice.

Thus, the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association urges Greece:

- Emphasize the plight of those victims of Article 19
- Introduce a new and special procedure to return citizenship to those who suffered from the application of Article 19 between 1955 and 1998
- Introduce new rules and measures that will seek to stop old and new discriminatory policies targeting the historical Muslim Turkish presence in the Western Thrace region of Greece