



Avrupa Batı Trakya Türk Federasyonu Föderation der West-Thrakien Türken in Europa Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe Ευρωπαϊκή Ομοσπονδία Τούρκων Δυτικής Θράκης Fédération des Turcs de Thrace Occidentale en Europe

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Name of the organisation: Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF)

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Dear Moderator,

My name is Melek Kırmacı, I am here to represent the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe, which is the international representative of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece.

With the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the Western Thrace Turks in Greece and the Greeks in Istanbul, Bozcaada and Gökçeada were granted minority status in Greece and Türkiye, and both communities were granted the right to establish and manage their own schools, religious and charitable institutions.

In the context of benefiting from the right to education, the principle of equality and non-discrimination has a very important role to play in ensuring equal access to quality education for people belonging to minority groups. Lack of equal access to quality education hinders minority children's access to civil and political rights and increases segregation in the community as a result of the marginalisation of children belonging to the minority.

The autonomy granted to the Turkish community by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne was largely implemented in the period from 1923 to 1967. However, it was greatly damaged by laws, regulations and practices implemented over the years following the 1967 Colonels' Junta. This autonomous structure in education has been complicated by *fait accompli* legal practices and has been literally taken under the control of the state without consulting our community.

The right to access equal and quality education is hindered today due to the government's interventions in the structure of autonomous education.

With Law No. 3518/2006, pre-school education has been rendered compulsory throughout the country, but it is not allowed to open kindergartens that will provide education in Turkish and Greek within the school system of the Turkish community in Western Thrace or privately.

The Turkish community in Western Thrace constitutes 55 percent of the population in Rodopi, 45 percent in Xanthi and 10 percent in Evros.

There are 141 pre-school state kindergartens in Rodopi, 141 in Xanthi, and 77 in Evros, but there is not even one single Turkish kindergarten.

Despite many applications from organisations belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace to establish bilingual kindergartens within the scope of the special educational system granted to the Turkish community and to establish other private bilingual kindergartens in the region, the Greek government rejects proposals to open Turkish-Greek bilingual kindergartens in the existing regions. This issue was also included in the 2008 report of former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues Ms. Gay McDougall and in the reports of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe in 2015.

Despite recommendations not to jeopardise children's right to education and to open Turkish kindergartens that will enable Turkish children to learn both Turkish and Greek better from an early age, the demand has not yet been met since 2006. Finally, a person belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace submitted a petition to the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament on this issue specifically, voicing the difficulties that the Turkish children face in public kindergartens where Greek education is provided at a meeting of the relevant EP Committee, indicating that it is unequal not to allow the opening of bilingual kindergartens in the Turkish school system. In addition, in July 2023, MEPs drew attention to this issue by presenting a written question on it. However, in response to the petition and the written question requesting an opinion from the European Commission, it was merely stated that education is within the competence of the Member States.

Primary schools belong to our community, but their numbers are rapidly decreasing. In 2010, a ministerial decision was issued allowing the merging of schools with a small number of students across the country, and the activities of a primary school with fewer than nine students were suspended and closed within two years.

This practice has become a systematic means of discrimination against the Turkish community in Western Thrace. In 2008, there were 194 minority primary schools in Western Thrace. This number decreased to 188 in 2011, to 170 in 2014, to 164 in 2015, to 133 in 2016, to 130 in 2017, to 128 in 2018, to 123 in 2019 and to 115 in 2020, and in 2021 it decreased to 103 and to 99 in 2022. Under the decision taken by the Ministry of National Education of Greece in August 2023, Turkish primary schools in seven villages in Rodopi and two villages in Xanthi were closed.

In contrast, the rights and status of the Greek community in Türkiye which have been guaranteed by the same treaty as for the Turkish community in Western Thrace, is backed by the state although its population has decreased.

Today, 21 children are studying in the Greek primary school in Gökçeada, Türkiye, which was opened with only 4 children in 2013, and there are 35 students in the secondary school opened in 2015. On the other hand, while the number of primary schools in Western Thrace was 231 in 1995, the number of primary schools has decreased to 90 in the last 28 years, with the closure of 9 primary schools in the 2023-24 school year.

Access to quality education is also problematic at the secondary school level. The number of Turkish secondary and high schools in Western Thrace is insufficient. Indeed, when taken as comparative data, the number of public secondary schools in the prefecture of Xanthi is 21, in the prefecture of Rodopi it is 14, and 27 in the prefecture of Evros, while the number of secondary and high schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace is 1 in Xanthi, 1 in Rodopi and zero in Evros.

The recent issues in accessing equal education at Xanthi Minority Secondary and High School reveal the unequal and discriminatory treatment faced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace by ignoring their needs in education.

Due to the increase in the number of students in the 2019-2020 school year, a system of double-shift schooling is applied in the morning and afternoon classes at the Xanthi Minority Secondary and High

School. Within the framework of this system, where there is no similar practice in public schools, students, parents, and school boards objected to the practical issues in accessing the school and demanded a new school building to solve the existing issue. In 2019, following the letters sent to the official authorities remained unanswered, a protest march was organised in Xanthi with the participation of 2,000 people.

In 2023, as the number of students in the school decreased, parents and student representatives of Xanthi Turkish Minority Secondary and High School demanded an end to double-shift schooling. The protest action launched against the imposition of double-shift schooling by the Directorate of Secondary Education of Xanthi at the school in the 2023-2024 school year lasted 11 days. The protest action, which continued with the slogan “No to Double-Shift Schooling”, resulted in the decision of the Directorate of Secondary Education of Xanthi that all students would have their classes in the morning, and this time, overcrowding occurred in the classrooms due to the closure of three classrooms in the basement of the same school building. At this point, demands regarding the opening of three additional classrooms as an urgent solution, allowing the use of four pre-fabricated classrooms on the land 500 meters away, and allocating a new school building in the long term are left unanswered.

In light of the following:

- Article 4(4) of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities,
- Articles 18 and 22 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,
- Articles 2(1), 13, 14 and 15 of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,
- Article 7 of the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,
- Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;

In light of its commitments and obligations towards the UN, as well as to the Council of Europe and the OSCE, Greece should execute the following:

1. The educational autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, which is included in within the framework of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, should be restored. Greece must ensure that everyone is effectively protected against all forms of discrimination and can fully enjoy their rights under the Treaty of Lausanne and other international human rights agreements.
2. Acknowledging that the Turkish community in Western Thrace has the right to pursue education in their mother tongue at all levels of education, including pre-school, it should allow the establishment of Turkish kindergartens within the Turkish school system that are completely private, and meet the demands in this direction.
3. It should stop closing Turkish primary schools within the context of unilateral decisions on the grounds of lack of sufficient pupils and leave the decision to the Turkish community itself in determining the steps to be taken for quality education.
4. Obstacles to the right to access quality education for the Turkish community in Western Thrace should be removed, and the persisting issues at the Xanthi Minority Secondary and High School should be resolved urgently in line with the demands of students, parents and school boards.