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Forum on Minority Issues
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Agenda Item 2: Inclusive education to empower minority youth

Turkish Minority Youth and Education in Western Thrace - Greece

Education is one of the primary means for survival of minority identities within majority communities. It plays an essential role for integration of minorities without getting assimilated in dominant majority cultures. Thus, education of minority youth should also be the number one issue for states while they talk about diversity inside their national domains.

Since the early 1990s, the overall level of education has been increasing among Muslim Turkish Minority youth in Western Thrace region of Greece. As of 2017, the number of Minority graduates from universities in Turkey or Greece either seeking jobs or already working at Greek private sector keeps growing. Similarly, Minority parents are also given the right to choose bilingual (Turkish and Greek) primary education or monolingual Greek one for their children. Nevertheless, apart from a couple of initiatives targeting primarily the improvement of the titular language among the Minority youth, fundamental problems in the realm of education of Minority children persist, which not only hinder the process of inclusion of the Minority youth with that of the majority community but also keep having negative impact on the promotion of diversity and coexistence in this part of the country.

First of all, the right for bilingual education is completely absent at pre-school and tertiary levels of education. Minority kids are enrolled in public nurseries where their mother language Turkish is totally absent. Similarly, there are only two bilingual secondary and high schools that can not meet the growing demands of Minority parents for bilingual education at the secondary level.

Secondly, the number of bilingual Minority primary schools is diminishing on the grounds that these schools keep closing since the number of Minority school children dropped dramatically in many remote villages. Yet, the ones who are still functioning keep having fundamental problems for decades. No Greek government has managed to solve main problems about meeting infrastructural needs and developing the overall quality of education in both Turkish and Greek curriculum of these schools. Henceforth, many Minority students spending six years at Minority bilingual schools cannot manage to read and write in both languages effectively.

Thirdly, the economic crisis that Greece has deeply been facing since 2010s affects the economic well-being and prospects of the Minority youth recently. It has become highly difficult for those young Minority people to find a job in Western Thrace after graduating from high schools or universities. There is a very limited number of jobs at the Greek private sector with very low level of investments. Discrimination can also be observed while getting hired for many jobs in Greek private sector. Thus, many of the Minority youth prefer to migrate and find a job abroad in other countries such as Turkey, Germany or Holland. Some of them move temporarily for seasonal jobs while some other cease seeing their future in Greece and leave permanently their homelands. Such waves of migration are likely to decrease the Muslim Turkish demography in Western Thrace in the near future.

Under the abovementioned conditions, it is highly difficult to argue that the Muslim Turkish youth effectively participates in cultural and political life in Greece. One can come across a number of youth gatherings in cafes



of central Komotini or Xanthi. Yet, only a few of them are of mixed character; Turkish and Greek young people together sharing the same table. Turkish-speaking Minority ones would rather sit together and socialize in their own way as the Greek-speaking ones do. The parallel existence of the two different minority and majority identities at different phases of social, political and economic life and various forms of discrimination that Minority youth faces should be one of the primary questions that Greek policy makers should find possible answers.

Thus, the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association urges Greece

- a) to solve decades-long problems regarding bilingual Minority schooling
- b) to form a platform of dialogue and cooperation with Minority members to find solutions to major problems that the Minority youth faces in their everyday lives
- c) to emphasize the economic improvement of the region and promote participation of young people at labour force.