

FEDERATION OF WESTERN THRACE TURKS IN EUROPE

Warsaw, 29 September-10 October 2008

OSCE, Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Dear President,
Distinguished representatives
And esteemed NGO Delegates,

I, hereby, would like to quote from the keynote address by High Commissioner van der Stoep at the opening of the OSCE Minorities Seminar in Warsaw, in 1994: "The existence of a minority is a question of fact and not of definition. (...) First of all, a minority is a group with linguistic, ethnic or cultural characteristics, which distinguish it from the majority. Secondly, a minority is a group which usually not only seeks to maintain its identity but also tries to give stronger expression to that identity." However, the Turkish minority in Greece, which is determined to maintain its identity, suffer problems in the field of education, although the Convention of the Rights of the Child, of which Greece is a part, recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity.

The Turkish minority is granted with the right to have education in its native language, and it does have an autonomy in the management of its educational institutions by the Treaty of Lausanne signed between Greece and Turkey in 1923 determining the status and the basic rights of the Minority in general and the bilateral educational agreements, the Educational Agreement(1951) and the Cultural Protocol(1968). Due to certain particularities in the educational system, however, minority students do not have adequate opportunities in the field of education. The major problems the minority faces in education include: a mixed system of administration, outdated textbooks, poorly-educated teaching staff and the absence of an efficient school curriculum.

Article 41 of the Treaty granted rights to the Muslim Turkish minority in Thrace ensuring that in the primary schools the instruction shall be given to the children of such Turkish nationals through the medium of their own language. It states:

As regards public instruction, the Turkish Government will grant in those towns districts, where a considerable proportion of non-Moslem nationals are resident, adequate facilities for ensuring that in the primary schools the instruction shall be given to the children of such Turkish nationals through the medium of their own language. This provision will not prevent the Turkish Government from making the teaching of the Turkish language obligatory in the said schools.

The Greek government under Law 3518/2006 decided to extend compulsory period in education from nine to ten years starting from the school year 2007-2008 and revised the condition of pupils' admission in pre-school education. The attendance of those pupils, who have completed the 5th year of their age, is now obligatory.

The Minority appreciates the need for the extension of compulsory education period from nine to ten years and considers the kindergartens vital for the next generations of the minority child. However, the Law 3518/2006 compels the minority children in Western Thrace who have completed the 5th year of their age to attend majority kindergartens under the Ministry of Education since the Law does not bring any regulation about ethnic and cultural differences of the children in Greece. The Turkish Minority in Western Thrace is determined to establish kindergartens in bilingual rather than the state kindergartens in which Greek language is used in the areas inhabited by the Turkish minority in line with the status of the minority and the legal framework in the field of education, the minority asserts that the kindergartens should be bilingual.

Since the OSCE participating states, including Greece, aim to create comprehensive framework for peace and stability in Europe, they deal equally with human rights. ABTTF reminds that the Helsinki Final Act acknowledges the “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief” as one of its guiding principles, and urges the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to monitor the implementation of commitments that Greece, an OSCE participating state, has undertaken in the field of human rights, in particular the right to education in mother tongue in all levels of minority education in Greece, including pre-school minority education.

ABTTF reminds the Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities (1996) that the ultimate object of all human rights is the full and free development of the individual human personality in conditions of equality. It recalls;

- States should create conditions enabling institutions which are representative of members of the national minorities in question to participate, in a meaningful way, in the development and implementation of policies and programmes related to minority education. (Article 5)
- In accordance with international law, persons belonging to national minorities, like others, have the right to establish and manage their own private educational institutions in conformity with domestic law. (Article 8)
- The first years of education are of pivotal importance in a child's development. Educational research suggests that the medium of teaching at pre-school and kindergarten levels should ideally be the child's language. Wherever possible, States should create conditions enabling parents to avail themselves of this option. (Article 11)

ABTTF recalls that all OSCE states are bound by United Nations obligations relating to human rights, including minority rights, and that the great majority of OSCE States are also bound by the standards of the Council of Europe. ABTTF recalls;

- Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which says education shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, racial or religious groups and contribute to the maintenance of peace.
- Article 4 (3) of the UN Declaration on the Rights on Persons Belonging to Minorities that “States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue.”
- Article 27 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,
- Article 1(2) and Article 5 of the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education,
- Article 28(1) and Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

- Article 8 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (EChRML)
- Article 14 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Besides, Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guarantees the right of parents to choose for their children schools other than those established by public authorities. It also guarantees the right of individuals and bodies to establish and manage alternative educational institutions as long as these conform to minimum educational standards as laid down by the State.

Recommendations:

1. Education needs to be made available and accessible at all levels to the members of a minority group and, most importantly, it needs to adapt to the socio-linguistic and cultural needs of minority students.
2. A culture of respect must be maintained to protect the right to be different and the principles of non-discrimination and equality in educational level. The accomplishment of such a goal requires a satisfactory level of education that takes into consideration the special social and cultural needs of the members of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace.
3. Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), therefore, urges the Greek government that the extension of the period of compulsory education from nine to ten years under Law No. 3518/2006 should be extended to the minority schooling system.
4. We assert that the minority system of education should be reconstructed according to the principles of multiculturalism and multilingualism. In this context, we encourage the Greek government to provide Muslim Turkish students with sufficient opportunities to learn both the official language of the state and their mother tongue.