

OSCE

HUMAN DIMENSION

IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October

Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association

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Ms/Mr. Moderator,

Regarding the violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief in Western Thrace, I will talk about the cases of Wakfs (Pious Foundations), Muftis (Religious Leaders) and Imams.

The Wakfs / Pious Endowments are legal entities which were constituted to enhance social welfare among the community of Muslim Turks living in Western Thrace(Greece). They are one of the most significant parts of the cultural, historic and the religious heritage of the Muslim Turkish Minority as they operation area include charitable and humanistic activities such as distribution of food or economic help to the ones in need, social and economic support to the elderly, conserving and repairing religious buildings (cemeteries, mosques etc). Until the late 1960s there was no problem between the State and the minority regarding the governing councils of these endowments. However, by the advent of the 1967 Military regime the board members of these institutions were replaced by persons favoring and supporting the regime, just like it happened in almost any other branch of political and social life of Greece. However, to the disappointment of the minority who suffered at least as much as their democratic Christian Greek counterparts, democracy was not restored in their institutions as it did in

almost every other institution, public body or authority in Greece. In her final visit to Western Thrace on the 5th of February 2007 the Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakogianni officially declared a list of measures regarding the Wakfs and their governing bodies in order to improve their operation quality and turn them into what they were when founded: institutions for the minority which will be run by minority itself. While the minority welcomed as a step to the right direction the application of nullifying the debts of the Wakfs to the state, which were caused by the misconducts and lack of directoral abilities of the Junta appointed board members, announced measures such as the election of the board members of Wakfs directly by the minority are still awaited in vain, 8 months after they were made.

The dispute over Muftis still continues to be one of the main problems that no progress has been achieved since the beginning of 1990s. Although The European Court of Human Rights concluded that Greece has violated the article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights which states that: “ Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion...” the Greek State still continues to reject the minority’s elected Muftis and works with the people appointed by herself. This automatically creates the absurd situation of a de facto and a de jure Mufti, which the normal minority person will have to endure. Greek State representatives continuously stipulate that throughout the world and even in Turkey Muftis are appointed but not elected. Also, it is underlined that the main reason to appoint Muftis is that they perform certain judicial and administrative functions. Nevertheless, according to the 1913 Athens Treaty that Greece signed, ratified, and which is still in use, the election of Muftis in Western Thrace is guaranteed.

Finally I am happy to underscore that in recent years different acts of targeting mosques and cemeteries of the Muslim Turkish society have ceased except very few exceptions. Every member of minority can freely go to the mosques and pray and perform his religious duties freely in them. The imams appointed for each mosque have been elected by the community. However, according to the new law passed by the Greek

Parliament in the beginning of this year, 240 imams will be appointed by a committee composed of five orthodox Greek members. None of its members belong to the Muslim religion and culture. Within this framework it seems quite interesting to observe how the quality of the imams will be evaluated by people who believe to and can assess only another religion. Despite this law has not yet been put into practice; it is a clear violation of minority's freedom to choose its imams for their mosques.

Recommendations

- 1- We recommend Greece to respect minority's right to elect its own religious leaders.
- 2- We recommend Greece to fully apply the provisions of the agreements that she signed and ratified for the protection of human and minority rights in Western Thrace.

Thank you for your attention.

Sinan Kavaz

Member

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