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**Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related
forms of intolerance, follow-up to and implementation
of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action**

Written statement* submitted by Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 May 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Systematic Discrimination against the Turkish Community in Thrace and Discrediting and Targeting Human Rights Defenders of the Turkish Community

In accordance with the agreements to which Türkiye and Greece are parties, the Turkish population in Thrace and the Greek Orthodox population in Istanbul, Gökçeada and Bozcaada were excluded from the compulsory exchange of population between the two countries. The legal status of the Turkish community in Thrace was defined by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which granted autonomy in education and religion. With the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, the Turkish community in Thrace was granted “minority” status and autonomy in education and religion.

The Turkish community in Thrace in Greece has an estimated population of 150,000, constituting 1.3% of the general population (2001 census), the majority in the heavily populated prefecture of Rodopi (52%), and almost half of the population in Xanthi (45%). According to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, in which the status and rights of the Turkish community in Thrace were determined, the Turkish community in Thrace has the right to establish, manage and control, at its own expense, all kinds of charitable, religious and social institutions, all kinds of schools and other institutions for education and training purposes and moreover, the community has the right to live freely in its own language and practice its own religion.

Our community, which was labelled the Turkish Minority in Thrace from the moment the treaty was signed until the 1967 Colonels’ Junta, was officially defined as the Turkish Minority in the region, and bilingual signboards in both Turkish and Greek were put in our schools. With the 1967 Colonels’ Junta, all of our rights were suspended. Oppressive and discriminatory policies against the Turkish community in Thrace were pursued despite the end of the 1967 Colonels’ Junta in 1974. Although associations bearing the word “Turkish” in their names have been operating officially without any obstacles for about half a century, in 1983, our country Greece has effectively banned three associations bearing the word “Turkish” in their names which are the Xanthi Turkish Union (founded 1927), Komotini Turkish Association (founded 1928) and the Western Thrace Turkish Teachers’ Union (founded 1936).

Today, our country Greece recognises only the existence of a “Muslim Minority in Thrace” as an autochthonous national minority group based on the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. While Turks and Macedonians living in the country are not recognised, other ethnic groups such as Roma, Pomak and Armenians are recognised and even supported by the state. The recognition of the Turkish community not only as a religious minority but also as a national minority is still rejected by the Greek government. It is true that media organisations generally do not publish news that may be deemed as unfavourable to the government. The struggle for the recognition of the ethnic Turkish identity led to the restriction of the rights of the minority, especially during the military dictatorship (1967-1974) and its aftermath.

As is constantly seen in the situation of the Turkish community in Thrace, the news reports in the mainstream media are published in manner which leads to increased provocation and manipulation towards the community in general, which can lead to hostility towards members of the Turkish community in Thrace. Persistent hate speech in the media and a clear manifestation of hatred towards Türkiye render the Turkish community in Thrace, all of whom are Greek citizens, a vulnerable target.

Turkish deputies representing the Turkish community in Thrace, NGOs and their representatives defending their rights are constantly subjected to pressure and intimidation in our country. Ozan Ahmetoğlu, President of the Xanthi Turkish Union (which is the oldest association of the Turkish community in Thrace and now which is included in the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases as it was banned because it bears the word “Turkish” in its name”), was investigated and then sued on charges that he did not wear a mask and provoked people during a democratic and peaceful march organised in July 2021 to protest the non-execution of the ECtHR judgment in favour of the association. The hearing of the case, which was supposed to be held in March 2024, has been postponed to 4 February 2025 due to the intensity of the work of the court¹.

In the political sphere, issues related to the Turkish community in Thrace are treated as a national issue, and our community is considered a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and portrayed as an extension of other powers, and this is accepted as such; there is total smear, stigma and marginalisation directed at our community due to the fact that this situation is reflected in all media outlets, including the mainstream media, in this way.

As an example of this situation, the general assembly of the Xanthi Turkish Union (ITB) was held on 14 April 2024, and Xanthi Turkish MPs Hüseyin Zeybek and Burhan Baran also attended this assembly. The deputies were harshly criticized for attending the ITB's general assembly in various newspapers and websites; Elefteros Typos accused two deputies of provocation in a news report published in the newspaper with the headline “Provocation: Two deputies at the Xanthi Turkish Union”². In our country, which has not restored the legal status of ITB by failing to execute the ECtHR judgment, the oldest association of our region pursues its activities, because our country has not applied the ECHR decision for 16 years. The ECHR's judgment dated 2008 about the Xanthi Turkish Union is quite clear, Greece violated the right to a fair trial due to the domestic legal process that lasted 22 years and the freedom of association by dissolving the ITB, which was not involved in any illegal activities³.

Persons belonging to the Turkish community in Thrace are being investigated and prosecuted on various grounds. Investigations have been initiated many times against the elected Muftis in Xanthi and Rodopi on grounds that they were “addressed as Muftis” for the religious services they performed in the region. So much so that in the first half of 2017, the elected Mufti of Komotini Ibrahim Şerif testified to the Department of Police in Komotini six times on the orders of the office of the prosecutor. Despite the ECHR's March 2000 judgment on the same issue against Greece, the elected Mufti of Komotini Ibrahim Şerif was once again investigated for alleged “usurpation of authority” in March 2024, and Şerif was called to testify to the police.

In a news article published in October 2021 on the news site newsbreak.gr, headquartered in Athens, false and defamatory accusations were made to stigmatise Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), upon which ABTTF filed a claim for damages in the Court of First Instance with a Single Judge against the aforementioned news site and the company that owns the site⁴. The case process is pending, and with the interim decision given by the court, the next hearing of the case will be held on 5 May 2025, at the Court of First Instance with several judges in Athens, which is a higher court. ABTTF President is constantly targeted, especially in the Greek local press in Thrace, and his written statements and articles are quoted and deliberately distorted⁵.

Greece has one of the worst records on minority rights in Europe. It has not ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and has not signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Turkish community in Thrace and the rights defenders representing it continue to face discrimination and racism. While we defend media pluralism and freedom of expression, stigmatisation, smearing and discrediting in the political sphere and in the media should be prevented. Greece should effectively strengthen mechanisms to detect hate speech, including online and on social media platforms, that could lead to the occurrence of a hate crime and the imposition of relevant sanctions. Steps must be taken to prevent and punish the spread of hate speech and hate-based ideas by banning aggressive language in politics and media.

1 <https://www.milletnews.com/western-thrace/mind-blowing-investigation-for-xanthi-turkish-union>

2 <https://eleftherostypos.gr/ellada/proklisi-dyo-vouleftes-stin-tourkiki-enosi-xanthis>

3 <https://gundemgazetesi.com/detayh.php?id=18645>

4 <https://www.milletnews.com/western-thrace/abtfts-lawsuit-against-newsbreakgr-website-postponed>

5 <https://www.komotinipress.gr/tourkiki-propaganda-apo-ti-nea-aristera-stin-elliniki-vouli/>