



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **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.

[23 May 2025]

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



## **Interference with the Freedom of Expression of NGOs and Continuing Violation of the Freedom of Association of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece**

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) became a member of the UN Economic and Social Council in Special Consultative Status in 2006 and has been contributing to the UN Human Rights Council with written and oral presentations ever since.

It has come to our attention that the content of the written statements submitted by ABTTF, which represents the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece, was altered after being uploaded to the system. A retrospective review revealed that all instances of the term “Western Thrace” used in the written statements submitted to the UN Human Rights Council during its 56th, 57th, and 58th sessions were changed to “Thrace”.

All statements submitted to the UN Human Rights Council stipulate that the written statement distributed in accordance with the Economic and Social Council’s resolution 1996/31 was received by the Secretary-General and published only in the language in which it was submitted. However, the replacement of the term “Western Thrace”, which is the historical geographical name of the region where the Turkish community of Western Thrace resides, with “Thrace” in the written statements submitted by ABTTF constitutes an intervention in the content of a written statement submitted by an NGO and a violation of Resolution 1996/31.

We have lodged a written complaint to the Secretariat of the UN Human Rights Council on 1 April 2025, accompanied by evidence. Upon not receiving a response, ABTTF further sent an email to the President of the UN Human Rights Council, Jürg Lauber, on 29 April 2025, sharing the correspondence submitted to the Secretariat on 1 April 2025. We requested from the President of the UN Human Rights Council to take immediate action and provide an explanation to ABTTF in light of the scandalous nature of the aforementioned situation. Unfortunately, we have not received any response to date. Therefore, we hereby declare that we expect a satisfactory explanation from the President and Secretariat of the UN Human Rights Council on this matter.

At this point, we would like to emphasise that the replacement of the term “Western Thrace” with “Thrace” in the written statements submitted by ABTTF constitutes a violation of the freedom of expression of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece, which we represent, and an attempt to manipulate the voice of national minorities before the UN Human Rights Council.

The Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece has been living in this region for centuries and has a population of approximately 150,000. The Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece constitutes 52% of the population in the prefecture of Rodopi and nearly half of the population in the prefecture of Xanthi. We would like to remind that the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne granted the Turkish community in the Western Thrace region of Greece the status of a “minority”, guaranteeing their educational and religious autonomy and rights. In accordance with the status granted to our minority, the Western Thrace Turks have equal rights to establish, manage, and control any charitable organisation, religious and social institution, school, and other educational and teaching institutions at their own expense, as well as the right to use their own language and freely practise their religion.

Our community has been recognised by the state as the Turkish minority in Western Thrace, Greece. In 1923, our schools were known as the Turkish schools, and their signboards have always been bilingual, in Turkish and Greek. This autonomous status was in place in Greece until 1967, but over the years, this autonomous structure in the fields of education and religion has been dismantled.

Although associations with the word “Turkish” in their names operated without any obstacles for almost half a century, in 1983, following political issues between Greece and our kin-state Türkiye, three associations bearing the word “Turkish” in their names, Xanthi Turkish Union (established 1927), Komotini Turkish Union (established 1928) and Western Thrace Turkish Teachers’ Union (established 1936) were dissolved.

In the three cases known as the Bekir-Ousta and Others v. Greece group of cases, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled in 2007 and 2008 that Greece had violated Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the freedom of assembly and association. Despite more than 17 years since the ECtHR's judgments, local courts have not re-opened the local cases in light of the European Court's judgments and case-law. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe continues to examine this group of cases, but our country has not made any real progress in this group of cases beyond taking steps to prolong the process.

Following the ECtHR judgments in this group of cases, the application for registration of the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Xanthi, which was to be established in Xanthi, was rejected, and this association also applied to the ECtHR in 2018.

Furthermore, the "Western Thrace Fenerbahçe Culture and Sports Association", established by fans of a sports club in our region, was officially registered in 2022. However, on 28 May 2024, the association was dissolved by a court on grounds that the phrase "Western Thrace" in its name was contrary to the law and public order.

In order to ensure the continued existence and identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece, Greece must immediately and effectively execute the aforementioned ECtHR judgments in the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases without any justification.

The Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece has been fighting systematic discrimination in Greece for many years. Whenever the state wants to increase pressure on our community, it resorts to financial and judicial investigations and prosecutes our leaders on various grounds. In connection with three cases concerning the violation of our freedom of association, a case has been brought against Ozan Ahmetoğlu, former president of the Turkish community in Western Thrace's oldest association, the Xanthi Turkish Union, which was dissolved because of the word "Turkish" in its name.

The reason cited is that Ozan Ahmetoğlu was accused of inciting people during a speech he made at a protest march in July 2021 regarding the non-execution of European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgments. The irony here is that the case against Ahmetoğlu was filed seven months after the protest march, and that the trial was held on 4 February 2025. Similarly, an investigation was re-opened in March 2024 against Ibrahim Şerif, the Mufti of Komotini elected by the Turkish community of Western Thrace, Greece, on charges of "usurpation of office", and Şerif was summoned to deliver a statement to the police.

Numerous reports express concern about smear campaigns and a hostile environment targeting human rights defenders and civil society representatives in Greece. In 2023, Dunja Mijatović<sup>1</sup>, the then Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, indicated that defamation campaigns targeting human rights defenders and stringent NGO registration procedures were hindering the protection of human rights and narrowing the civil space in the country.

In March 2024, the Expert Council on NGO Law, which is affiliated to the Conference of INGOs (CINGO) of the Council of Europe highlighted in a study<sup>2</sup> regarding the stigmatisation of NGOs in Council of Europe Member States that human rights defenders, humanitarian aid workers, and activists have been accused of being members of criminal networks and even of espionage.

In July 2024, the European Commission reported in its Rule of Law Report<sup>3</sup> that concerns regarding the civil society sector persisted. Moreover, Human Rights Watch noted in its 2025 Greece report<sup>4</sup> that there are rule of law issues stemming from state actions that weaken democratic institutions and harm human rights, including a hostile environment for human rights defenders.

Our country Greece must develop effective policies against structural discrimination and inequality against the Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece. Defamation, stigmatisation and hate speech against the defenders of our community's rights must be condemned and punished at all levels of public and political life.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Assembly and Association should visit our country Greece in order to investigate

restrictions and increasing pressure on NGOs and human rights defenders throughout the country, including minority issues affecting the Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece.

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1. <https://www.coe.int/nl/web/commissioner/-/greek-authorities-should-reverse-the-trend-undermining-the-work-of-human-rights-defenders-and-journalists>
  2. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/-/the-expert-council-on-ngo-law-publishes-a-study-on-stigmatisation-of-ngos-in-europe>
  3. [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6741f4b2-6a10-44ba-b40c-97a5a38e6827\\_en?filename=21\\_1\\_58062\\_coun\\_chap\\_greece\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6741f4b2-6a10-44ba-b40c-97a5a38e6827_en?filename=21_1_58062_coun_chap_greece_en.pdf)
  4. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/greece>