



General Assembly

Distr.: General
6 July 2020

Original: English

Human Rights Council

Forty-third session

24 February–20 March 2020

Agenda item 5

Human rights bodies and mechanisms

Note verbale dated 18 June 2020 from the Permanent Mission of Greece to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

The Permanent Mission of Greece to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva presents its compliments to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has the honour to provide herewith the comments of the Government of Greece in relation to the written statement submitted by the “Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe”, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status (A/HRC/43/NGO/50) (see annex).

The Permanent Mission of Greece kindly requests the Office of the High Commissioner to circulate the present note and the text attached* as a document of the forty-third session of the Human Rights Council under agenda item 5.

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

GE.20-08968(E)



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Annex to the note verbale dated 18 June 2020 from the Permanent Mission of Greece to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Reply to the written statement of the NGO “Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe”

The non-governmental organization “Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe” has circulated a written statement regarding the education of children belonging to the “Turkish community” in Western Thrace, Greece.

First of all, it is to be noted that the above mentioned NGO continues to use inaccurately the term “Turkish community” in Thrace, instead of “Muslim minority”, which is the correct term used in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne which established the status of the said religious minority in Greece.

Greece is a fervent defender of the right to education, which is enshrined in the Constitution. Education constitutes an “essential mission of the State” and, as such, is provided to all, including, of course, minority students. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne has established the status of the existing Muslim minority, which is a religious one, located in Thrace, composed of three distinct groups, whose mother tongue is Turkish, Pomak or Romani. The Greek State ensures and guarantees the equal and unhindered participation of minority students in education, through the protection of their cultural identity, language and religious conscience and worship. The model of minority education is provided for in the aforementioned Lausanne treaty, and is regulated by bilateral educational protocols between Greece and Turkey. It is governed by the overarching legal framework for public education, as well as by special legislation, and aims at protecting the minority linguistic identity and its particular cultural, religious and linguistic characteristics.

Parents of pupils belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace retain the right to decide to enroll their children in ordinary or minority schools. Minority schools in Greece function under a special status and, unlike the other public schools in the country, are granted a degree of autonomy in their functioning. The minority education system follows a bilingual syllabus distributing Turkish and Greek language equally in time and volume.

Regarding the accusations about the bilingual curriculum of the minority schools, it should be noted that 55% of the curriculum is taught in Turkish language and 45% in Greek. The teachers in the minority educational curriculum receive a high quality university education and then are continuously guided and trained by Muslim teachers appointed as Coordinators of the Minority Schools Educational Program. The textbooks of the Greek language curriculum are written and edited bearing in mind the cultural identity and diversity of the Muslim children and are aiming to the teaching of the Greek language as secondary language. The public school Greek textbooks may be used as supplementary material. The textbooks used for the Turkish curriculum are written and printed in Turkey in line with the provisions of the 1968 Additional Cultural Protocol between Greece and Turkey. The Institute of Educational Policy of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of Greece completes relevant internal administrative processes, in line with the provisions of the said Protocol, within strict deadlines. The Turkish side bears the full responsibility of any distribution delay.

Regarding the comments on lack of “preschools in mother tongue in Western Thrace”, it should be clarified that there are no provisions on pre-school education in the Lausanne Treaty, thus pre-school education for Muslim children is provided in the monolingual public kindergartens. This system ensures that Muslim children have adequate access to the learning of the official language at an early stage and, thus, may better adapt to the primary school curriculum and integrate into all aspects of local society.

Furthermore, the Institute of Educational Policy of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of Greece is undertaking a pilot project for the support of Muslim children in Thrace Nursery Schools (MIS 5003740), co-financed by the Greek government and the European

Social Fund, within the framework of the Operational Programme “Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020”. The subject of the Operation is the design and implementation of a pilot pre-school education programme through the simultaneous presence inside the classroom of both the kindergarten teacher and an associate member of the minority holding a university degree, with an aim to manage the educational environment effectively through activities that support the cognitive, social and linguistic development of the children, taking advantage of their mother tongue as well. The pilot was implemented in a small number of nursery schools in Thrace for two school years (6 schools in 2017-2018 and 12 schools in 2018-2019) in the form of an action-research which combined: a) continuous scientific support for the nursery teachers and their associates by the Scientific Project Team (SPT) and the specialists and b) the organisation of activities aiming at involving parents as well. Through a dynamic process of continuous scientific support, feedback and training, the Scientific Project Team will draw conclusions and will make recommendations for implementation in the future..

The accusations that Greece is deliberately reducing the number of minority schools are unfounded. While a general measure regarding the reduction of the number of elementary schools has affected some minority schools, more transportation itineraries to the existing ones have been added to compensate for complications. Their re-opening will be re-examined in case the number of pupils increases.

With regards to the alleged state intervention through the releasing of a circular for celebration of religious holidays at Muslim minority schools, it is to be noted that the above mentioned circular contained special provisions for minority schools inviting them to organise a celebration on the value of education.

The education of the children of the Muslim minority in Thrace constitutes a matter of high priority in the context of the general national policy for the social and economic integration of the Muslim minority into the contemporary Greek society, with full respect towards their special language and cultural characteristics.
