



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 9

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

## **Note verbale dated 15 October 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 herewith submits to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 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/45/NGO/159) (see annex).

The Permanent Mission of Greece kindly requests the Office of the High Commissioner to circulate the present note verbale and the annex thereto\* as a document of the Human Rights Council under agenda item 9.

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



## **Annex to the note verbale dated 15 October 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”**

With reference to the written statement No. A/HRC/45/NGO/159, dated 30.9.2020, Greece would like to state the following:

The Muslim minority which resides in the region of Thrace, Greece is defined as a whole by its religious identity and not by ethnic origins. The members of the minority are Greek citizens of Muslim faith. Insisting on the term “Turkish” purposefully ignores a large part of the Muslim minority population in Thrace (Pomaks and Roma) and violates the letter and the spirit of the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, to which Turkey is a party.

The Greek State ensures and guarantees the equal and unhindered participation of minority students in education, as well as the protection of their cultural identity, language and religious conscience and worship. Parents of pupils belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace retain the right to decide to enroll their children in ordinary or minority schools. The latter function under a special status and are granted a large degree of autonomy in their functioning, significantly more so than other greek schools.

The accusations that Greece is deliberately reducing the number of minority schools (quote) “as part of the assimilation and oppression efforts towards the Turkish community” (end quote) are totally unfounded. The reason for the decrease is that mergers of elementary schools are being carried out in communities where there are fewer than 9 pupils in order to ensure the optimal functioning of the school units. Consequently, the operation of certain minority schools has been suspended in order to achieve both the better socialization of students and an improved and more effective education. The main aim is therefore to upgrade minority education through larger minority school units, as is the case for the general curriculum schools. However, the suspension of some school units’ functioning constitutes a temporary measure, and their re-opening will be considered, should the relevant student body increase in the future. In the meantime, the Directorate of Primary Education ensures the transportation of students to the host schools by adding more transportation itineraries to the already existing ones.

The cities of Xanthi and Komotini host two Islamic educational institutions (Koranic Schools or “Medresses”), which are funded by the State. Law 2621/1998 stipulates that all students of Muslim faith who have completed primary education may enroll in the Islamic educational institutions. The Religious Specialization courses are taught in the Turkish language, while the duration of teaching hours of the Quran has been increased.

Furthermore the Supervisory Council for Medresses in Thrace was established by Law 4301/2014 as an advisory body to the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs on issues concerning the Medresses and the religious education of the Muslim minority in Thrace in general. This ensures the right of the religious leaders of the Muslim minority to propose solutions, practices and ideas which meet the religious needs of the minority, as well as the need for co-operation and support by the State in laying the educational and scientific foundations of Islamic religious education. Thus, the best experiences and practices of the general Educational system can be associated with the specific needs of the religious education of the Muslim minority in Thrace.

The degrees offered by the two Islamic educational institutions are equivalent to the Public Ecclesiastical High Schools; their holders have access to the Greek higher education system. Moreover, a 0.5% quota in favour of the members of the Muslim minority in Thrace has long been introduced for the admission to Universities and Higher Technical Educational Institutes / Institutions. The obvious advantages of such a measure are the promotion of

further integration of persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace in the wider society, in an effective and inclusive way, and an improved access to the labour market.

Moreover, the Theology Faculty of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki established an Islamic Studies Program in the academic year 2016-2017, as well as a “Minority Education Department”, leading to a specialized public university degree in this field.

Finally, Greece underlines that, in recent years, a number of laws, policies and measures aiming to combat both racism as a phenomenon and its expressions through racist behaviours has been adopted. The establishment of a national board against racism and intolerance with the participation of independent bodies such as the National Commission of Human Rights and the Ombudsman, as well as civil society, is key in this respect. Seeking to further enhance policy coherence on the matter, Greece is currently elaborating its first national action plan on combating racism and all forms of intolerance. Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance are in clear and direct opposition to the core values and principles enshrined within the Greek constitution, which safeguards and protects the rights of all Greek citizens, including the members of the Muslim minority in Thrace.

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