



General Assembly

Distr.: General
29 May 2017

English only

Human Rights Council

Thirty-fifth session

6-23 June 2017

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 the 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.

[15 May 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.17-08572(E)



* 1 7 0 8 5 7 2 *

Please recycle A small recycling symbol consisting of three arrows forming a triangle.



The problem of bilingual pre-school education in Western Thrace, Greece

The right to education is one of the core principles in international human rights and it should be faithfully implemented by all Member States. 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that “Every person has a right to education and to any other fundamental right dependent upon the realization of the right to education”. Principle of equality and non-discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to education is a key to securing equal access to quality education for persons belonging to minority groups.

The Turkish community in Western Thrace¹, Greece is granted with the right to education in its mother tongue and autonomy in the management of its educational institutions with the Treaty of Lausanne which determined the status and basic rights in general. However, educational autonomy has been undermined and diminished by governmental practices over years. Today, Greek authorities have wide-ranging control over minority schools at all levels, whether it concerns the composition and the functioning of the school boards, the hiring and firing of teachers, the distribution of textbooks or the building and repair of school buildings. Furthermore, there are no bilingual kindergartens or nurseries for the Turkish children to learn their mother tongue in their early childhood, although compulsory education includes pre-school education under a law adopted in 2006.

The Turkish community in the region appreciates the extension of compulsory education in Greece. Since learning and use of mother tongue in early childhood education is very important during transition to school to prepare children for multi-language education in primary school, the Turkish community considers the establishment of bilingual pre-schools within minority education system in Western Thrace vital for next generations of Turkish children. Under these circumstances the right not to be discriminated is violated because the Greek government, fails, without an objective and reasonable justification to treat differently Turkish children who speak a different language other than Greek. All Turkish children are obliged to attend public kindergartens whether they will continue minority primary schools or public primary schools for the next year or not. Families reluctantly send their children to Greek-language state kindergartens despite the risk of losing their linguistic and cultural identity.

In the beginning of 2012-2013 school year, some children belonging to the Turkish community in Echinós (Şahin) village of Xanthi were not enrolled to the first grade of the primary school on the ground that those children did not attend state kindergarten in the previous school year. The parents stressed that they did want to send their children to state kindergartens where the language of education is only Greek.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe (ECRI) mentioned in its fifth report on Greece in 2015 that there are no special measures for the minority under Law No. 3518/2006 which has made pre-school education compulsory. The ECRI noted that the Government has rejected proposals to open Turkish- Greek bilingual kindergartens in the existing bilingual primary schools and referred to the case in Echinós where the regional school inspectors refused to enroll 20 children who had not attended the obligatory kindergarten and dismissed a bilingual school’s principal, who had registered and taught them. The ECRI stressed that children’s right to schooling should not be jeopardized and further recommended that the authorities should take all necessary steps to ensure that minority children have access to a bilingual or monolingual elementary school, as per their parents’ choice².

¹ The status of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace was established by the Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923. However, the Greek government officially recognizes only a “Muslim minority in Thrace” and denies existence of an ethnic Turkish minority in the country.

² <https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Greece/GRC-CbC-V-2015-001-ENG.pdf>

ABTTF regrets that a commonly stated problem of the absence of bilingual kindergartens which is mentioned in the report³ of the former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall in 2008, has not been taken into consideration by Greek authorities despite many applications by the community organizations in the region for establishment of bilingual kindergartens within the special education system that the Turkish community has been granted and establishment of other private bilingual kindergartens in the region.

There is still no step taken by Greek authorities or there are no plans on how to avoid such situations in Echinis in the next school year. The enrolment of students to the bilingual primary schools for the next school year has started in May 2017, while parents wait for the establishment of bilingual kindergartens in the minority schooling system.

In February 2017, the Institute of Educational Policies under the Ministry of Education of Greece declared that they would carry out a pilot project which envisages that a bilingual minority member, graduated from one of the higher education institutions in Greece, would work with a teacher in a kindergarten class in state kindergartens in six provinces where children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace live⁴.

According to the statement published by the Institute, the pilot project would be implemented in the remaining part of the academic year in six state kindergartens for an easy adaptation of the children to kindergartens, where Turkish children have no option than to go state. The institute declared that the project, which will be implemented in six schools at the initial stage, would be expanded into 12 in the next academic year and further noted that necessary proposals after the assessment of the results of the pilot program would be presented to the Ministry at the end of the academic year.

Civil society organizations representing the Turkish community reacted this pilot project implementation on grounds that this is not an improvement in educational rights of the Turkish community in Western Thrace. The pilot project which would provide working in state schools of a bilingual member of the Turkish community, not necessarily a bilingual pre-school teacher, does not meet the Turkish community's demand for the establishment of bilingual kindergartens within minority schooling system.

The Turkish community should have a right to participate in the life of the State and in decisions affecting them. Greece should provide adequate opportunities to persons belonging to the Turkish community to learn its mother tongue or to learn through the medium of the mother tongue, alternatives which should not be understood as mutually exclusive. As Gay McDougall, former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues recommended, bilingual kindergartens would allow better knowledge of both Turkish and Greek from an early stage therefore providing benefits in terms of integration, and enabling greater choice of whether to go minority of Greek public primary school.

In light of the information above, we call the Government of Greece:

- To revise its policy concerning bilingual pre-school education in the region of Western Thrace and make good use of all available domestic and international instruments including advisory and consultative bodies in order to address problems in minority issues,
- To establish bilingual kindergartens in the region in line with the minority schooling system,
- To allow the Turkish community to establish private bilingual kindergartens where the language of education will be Turkish and Greek.

³ For the full report

A/HRC/10/11/Add.3, <http://daccessddsny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/111/98/PDF/G0911198.pdf?OpenElement>

⁴ <http://www.gundemgazetesi.com/haberyunanistan/detay/2718>