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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.

[31 January 2020]

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



The persistent structural and systematic problems in education of children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece

The UN Handbook on “Language Rights of Linguistic Minorities: A Practical Guide for Implementation” notes that establishment and operation of private schools and educational services using minority languages as a medium of instruction should be allowed, recognized and even facilitated. However, persons belonging to national minorities in various regions of the world suffer disproportionately from unequal or restricted access to quality education and inappropriate education strategies as stated at the UN Forum on Minority Issues held in November in 2019.

The Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece is granted with the Lausanne Treaty the right to establish, manage and control at their own expense any school for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein. Turkish community has the right to establish private and public schools, but in practice this division between public and private schooling is not implemented. In practice, Turkish minority schools are registered as private schools, but are under the direct control of the state, while a complex system of legal provisions governs their establishment and operation.

The autonomy in education has been undermined through a number of regulations and practices, which resulted in a low-qualified education in minority schools with structural problems regarding training of teachers, the curriculum and textbooks with a full control of the state at all levels, in a stark contradiction to granted rights to the community by international treaties. The most recent example to state intervention is that the Ministry of Education released a circular for celebration of religious holidays at Turkish minority schools where all students are Muslim.

The most alarming problem in education in, and teaching of minority languages is the lack of preschools in mother tongue in Western Thrace. Turkish children are obliged to attend public kindergartens where the instruction is only in Greek under Law 3518/2006 which extends the compulsory period in education. However, extension of compulsory education does not include Turkish minority schooling system and therefore there are no Turkish/private kindergartens or nurseries for the community children to learn their mother tongue in their early childhood. The government rejected proposals to open Turkish-Greek bilingual kindergartens in the existing bilingual Turkish minority primary schools, despite many applications by the community organizations for establishment of bilingual kindergartens in the region.

In 2008, there were 194 Turkish minority primary schools in Western Thrace. Despite autonomy in education, minority primary schools were closed with decision of the Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education in the Eastern Macedonia and Thrace since 2010. The number gradually decreased to 188 in 2011, 170 in 2014, and 164 in 2015 and 133 in 2016 and 130 in 2017, 128 in 2018 and 123 in 2019 on grounds of decreasing number of pupils in schools, while there is no further education planning for bussed education for pupils who need to go another village for education.

The minority primary schools follow a bilingual – half Greek half Turkish – curriculum, although scholars categorize this type of education model as two parallel monolingual education systems, not bilingual education system. In the Turkish primary schools, Turkish curriculum is designed without approval or input from minority teachers. In these schools, the balance of hours per language per subject in minority education significantly shifted over the years in favour of the majority language.

Furthermore, textbooks used by the Turkish primary schools for the Greek curriculum are printed and distributed by the Ministry of Education. Textbooks used for the Turkish curriculum, are written, edited and printed in Turkey especially for the Turkish pupils and are imported and distributed after approval of the Greek Ministry of Education. Due to the long delays in distribution, Turkish textbooks are outdated, and the last textbooks were printed in 2010. Teachers in the Greek curriculum do not know the mother tongue of the

Turkish pupils and have no special training for teaching in Turkish minority schools, while all teachers in the Turkish curriculum are graduates of a former special pedagogical academy in Thessaloniki with very limited courses taught in Turkish and with no internal education training programmes.

The Ministry of Education in Greece initiated the Programme of Education of Muslim Children (PEM) in 1997, known as Frangoudaki program, as part of the European Union policy against social exclusion. The programme aimed to improve the Greek curriculum of Turkish minority primary schools through production of new textbooks and educational materials and training of school teachers in the Greek curriculum. This programme has been extensively criticized by members of the Turkish community due to the fact that the programme only focuses on the Greek curriculum in Turkish minority primary schools. No steps have been taken to improve the quality of education in the Turkish curriculum which provides education in mother tongue in the region. In September 2018, Turkish minority primary schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace started a demonstration for demanding education with current Greek textbooks used in public schools instead of simplified Greek textbooks which were prepared under PEM. After protests by 48 Turkish minority primary schools, the Minister of Education issued a circular that ordered the use of Greek textbooks used at public schools to be used as supplementary material in Turkish minority schools.

With regard to secondary education, the main problem is the number of schools. While 52% of the population of the Rhodope Prefecture and 45% of the Xanthi Prefecture are Turkish speaking, there is only one Turkish school in each prefecture. The increase of number of students in the school year of 2019-2020 led the Xanthi Turkish Minority Secondary and High School to implement two-shift system of morning and afternoon schools. Two-shift schools with practical problems are objected by the Parent-Teacher Association and the School Council and they demanded a new school building. Although the association and school council officially sent letters to public authorities for solution of the building problem in February and June 2019, the letters remained unanswered. This led demonstration on 12 September 2019 and a march was organized on 23 September 2019 with participation of 2000 people. No steps have yet been taken by relevant authorities.

Structural and systematic problems in the Turkish minority education system have not been solved despite the efforts in recent years to increase the quality of education. The overall quality of education in Turkish primary schools falls far below Greek public schools. This often means that children have poor command of both Greek and Turkish on leaving primary school. Pupils often have to give up their right to bilingual education, if they wish to access the better-quality education provided in public schools which are mono-lingual. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) noted in its report on Greece in 2015 that the situation in minority schools, together with a general lack of teaching resources, resulted in lower educational standards and attainment levels amongst minority children, and ultimately their social and economic marginalisation and exclusion.

Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is quality education and its aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. 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 in the field of education.

We call on Greek authorities to:

- restore autonomy in education granted to the Turkish community in Western Thrace by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty in full compliance with the special status of the Turkish community in education,
- establish bilingual kindergartens within minority schooling system and allow the Turkish community in Western Thrace to establish private bilingual kindergartens where the language of education will be Turkish and Greek,
- annul the decision on closure of Turkish primary schools on economic grounds,

- revise its policies concerning the primary and secondary schools of the Turkish minority, including their number and location, management of school councils, recruitment and training of teachers of both Greek and the Turkish curriculum, and to secure the revision and modernisation of textbooks and education materials to be used for both curriculums together with experts and the Turkish community,
 - make good use of all available domestic and international instruments and establish co-operation and collaboration with the Turkish community through advisory and consultative bodies in order to address problems in education at all levels.
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