



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
31 January 2024

English only

---

## Human Rights Council

### Fifty-fourth session

11 September–13 October 2023

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.

[22 August 2023]

---

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



## **Access to Preschool Education in the Mother Tongue and the Rapid Decrease in Primary Schools for Children Belonging to the Turkish Community in Western Thrace, Greece**

Under to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the Western Thrace Turks in Greece and the Greeks of Istanbul, Bozcaada and Gökçeada gained minority status and have the right to establish, manage and control other institutions for education and training and to live freely in their own language and practice their own religion.

The educational autonomy granted to the Turkish community was implemented to a large extent during the 1923-1967 period. However, in the period following the 1967 Colonels' Junta; it has been greatly damaged over the years through the laws, regulations and practices that have been implemented.

The primary schools belong to our community, but their numbers are dwindling fast. In 2010, a ministerial decision was enacted to allow the merging of schools with a low number of students across the country, and a primary school with less than nine students was closed. This rule is treated as a public school in practice, although Turkish schools are registered as private schools and are autonomous under the Treaty of Lausanne.

This practice has become an instrument of systematic discrimination against the Turkish community in Western Thrace. In 2008, there were 194 primary schools belonging to our community in Western Thrace. It reached 188 in 2011, 170 in 2014, 164 in 2015, 133 in 2016, 130 in 2017, 128 in 2018, 123 in 2019 and 115 in 2020. It decreased to 103 in 2021 and to 99 in 2022. With the decision taken by the Ministry of Education of Greece in August 2023, the Turkish primary schools in seven villages in Rodopi and two villages in Xanthi will be closed. According to the relevant decision, Turkish primary schools were closed in the districts of Amaranta (Yahyabeyli), Darmeni (Değirmendere), Amfia (Hacımustafaköy), Kato Kardamos (Gerdeme), Porpi (Ortakışla), Salpi (Sasallı) and Stilarion (Baraklı) in the prefecture of Rodopi. As for the primary schools in the districts of Eora (Salıncak) and Palio Zigo (Mizanlı) in the prefecture of Xanthi, they will be closed. In the 2023-2024 school year, the number of Turkish primary schools decreased to 90.

While there are 42 public kindergartens in Rodopi and 30 in Xanthi, the Turkish community does not have a single kindergarten.

The government rejected applications for the establishment of kindergartens in the region to teach Turkish children in the mother tongue. Children whose mother tongue is Turkish are obliged to attend state kindergartens where only Greek is the language of education, which negatively affects the beginning of our children's educational life.

Ozan Ahmetoğlu, a child's parent, clearly explains this issue in the petition he submitted to the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament. A petition demanding that children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace be taught Turkish in pre-school education was discussed in the PETI Committee on 10 January 2022. Petitioner indicated that his child, who was 5 years old in 2019, had to go to a public kindergarten, and that he had many difficulties in the kindergarten class, where only education in Greek is available, although the child does not know Greek yet. Since Turkish kindergartens are not allowed in the region and the education is in Greek in the state kindergarten and the teachers working in the state kindergartens do not speak Turkish, communication between the child and the teacher is not established, which brings additional difficulties at the beginning of the child's educational life. Petitioner called for legal and political measures to be taken to ensure that the children of the Turkish community in Western Thrace are granted bilingual pre-school education or to be authorised by the community organisations in the region to establish private pre-school education. Petitioner also noted that he filed a complaint with the Greek Ombudsman in February 2020 and wrote to the Minister of Education in May 2020 about this request but received no response.

The right not to be discriminated against is violated by the fact that Greece does not treat the minority children who speak a language other than Greek without providing any objective and reasonable justification. We recall the recommendation of Ms. Gay McDougall, former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, in 2008 for minority children in Komotini and Xanthi to open Turkish kindergartens that would enable them to better learn both Turkish and Greek from an early age, and the option to attend a Turkish minority school or a Greek public primary school. ECRI stressed that children's right to education should not be jeopardised and also recommended that the authorities take all necessary steps to ensure that the minority children have access to a bilingual or monolingual primary school at their parents' choice.

Greece insists on ignoring the need to establish Turkish kindergartens and continues to close Turkish primary schools, arguing the lack of sufficient number of students. Issues in education were reported to the European Commission in July 2023. Members of the European Parliament (MEP) Loránt Vincze (Romania, EPP), François Alfonsi (France, Greens/EFA), Herbert Dorfmann (Italy, EPP) and Yana Toom (Estonia, Renew Europe) have submitted to the European Commission a written question entitled "Access to high-quality preschool education for children from the Turkish-minority community in Western Thrace (Greece)". The MEPs stated that access to quality early childhood education contributes to the healthy development and educational success of the children, and that depriving children of the Turkish community from pre-school education in their mother tongue creates inequality in education. Furthermore, the Members of the European Parliament indicated that the Turkish community in Western Thrace was granted autonomy in education with the right to establish and manage its own schools, but that the number of bilingual Turkish primary schools decreased due to the state's insufficient support.

This situation increases our concern that the situation in our region will have a similar outcome with Rhodes and Kos over time. Indeed, when the islands of Rhodes and Kos were transferred from Italy to Greece in accordance with the Treaty of Paris in 1947, the Turkish community in the islands had their own schools and education in Turkish was provided. 3 Turkish schools in Rhodes and 2 Turkish schools in Kos were closed in 1972 and never opened again. Today, our country describes the Turkish community in the islands as Greek Muslims and does not restore their right to education that they had in the past.

In contrast to the case of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, the Greek community in Türkiye, whose status and rights were defined by the same treaty is supported by the state despite their declining population. There are 21 children in the Greek primary school, which was opened in Gökçeada in Türkiye in 2013 with only 4 children, and there are 35 students in the secondary school opened in 2015. On the other hand, while the number of primary schools in Western Thrace was 231 in 1995, the number of primary schools decreased to 90 in the last 28 years, with 9 primary schools to be closed in the 2023-24 school year.

The principle of equality and non-discrimination plays a crucial role in ensuring equal access to quality education for persons belonging to the minority groups. The lack of equal access to quality education reduces the minority children's access to civil and political rights and increases segregation in society as a result of the marginalisation of minority children.

### **Recalling:**

- Article 4(4) of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities,
- Articles 18 and 22 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,
- Articles 2(1), 13, 14 and 15 of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,
- Article 7 of the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,
- Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;

Conscious of its commitments and obligations to the UN, as well as to the Council of Europe and the OSCE, Greece should proceed with the following:

1. The educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace granted by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne should be restored.
2. Recognising that the Turkish community in Western Thrace has the right to pursue education in the mother tongue at all levels of education, including pre-school, it should allow the establishment of Turkish kindergartens within the Turkish school system and should meet the demands in this direction.
3. It should stop closing Turkish primary schools with unilateral decisions on grounds of lack of sufficient number of students, and leave the decision to the Turkish community to determine the steps to be taken for a quality education. Greece must ensure that everyone is effectively protected against all forms of discrimination and can fully enjoy their rights under the Treaty of Lausanne and other international human rights treaties.

---

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PETI-CM-730151\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PETI-CM-730151_EN.pdf)

<https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/10session/A.HRC.10.11.Add.1.pdf>

<https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-greece/16808b5796>

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2023-002144\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2023-002144_EN.html)