



Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europa

Newsletter

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ABTTF paid a working visit to Strasbourg



During the working visit held parallel to the PACE Spring Plenary Session, ABTTF President met with the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe.

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) paid a working visit to Strasbourg on 15-17 April 2024, in parallel with the Spring Plenary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

The ABTTF delegation, consisting of ABTTF President Halit Habip Oğlu and ABTTF International Relations Director Melek Kirmacı Arik, conveyed the current issues of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, especially those related to the freedom of association, in their meetings with PACE members and the Council of Europe bodies.

During his three-day working visit, ABTTF President Habip Oğlu met with the new Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Michael O'Flaherty, who took office on April 1, in his office.

Within the framework of their contacts in Strasbourg, the ABTTF delegation met with Chair-

person of the National Delegation of Norway to PACE and European People's Party (EPP) Vice-Chairperson Ingjerd Schie Schou, Chairperson of the National Delegation of Türkiye to PACE Yıldırım Tuğrul Türkeş, PACE Turkish Delegation Members Abdurrahman Babacan, Mehmet Akalın, Mustafa Canbey, Sena Nur Çelik Kanat, Yunus Emre and Zeynep Yıldız and with officials from the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

During the meetings with the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe and politicians, ABTTF President Habip Oğlu indicated that the rule of law in Greece has been seriously threatened and systematically violated recently, and that, according to a survey conducted in March 2024, only 3 out of 10 people in the country had noted that they trusted the judiciary and judges. Pointing out that the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU), of which Greece is a member, are closely monitoring the deterioration of the rule of law in the country, Habip Oğlu explained that the European Parliament has called upon the European Commission to act in face of serious developments that threaten the rule of law in Greece within a resolution it had

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adopted in February 2024.

Habip Oğlu underlined that Greece denies the existence and identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and stated that the institutions, organisations and leading representatives of the Turkish community, including ABTF, are directly targeted and marginalised with hate speech in politics and mainstream media.

During the meeting with the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the ECtHR, the ABTF delegation emphasised that Greece has not executed the ECtHR judgments with respect to the Xanthi Turkish Union, Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi and Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association in the Bekir-Ousta

men of the Prefecture of Rodopi and Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association in the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases for the past 16 years, stating that this is due to the rule of law. He noted that there was a clear violation of the principle and that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will re-examine the group of cases in question at its next meeting on 11-13 June 2024.

During the meeting with the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the ECtHR, the ABTF delegation stressed that Greece has not executed the ECtHR judgments with respect to the Xanthi Turkish Union, Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi and Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association in the Bekir-Ousta



and Others group of cases for the past 16 years, noting that this constitutes a clear violation of the principle of the rule of law, and reminded that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will re-examine this group of cases at its next meeting to be held on 11-13 June 2024.

ABTF President met with Chairperson of the German National Delegation to PACE Frank Schwabe

President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTF) Halit Habip Oğlu met with Frank Schwabe, Chairperson of the German National Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), who is also a Member of the German Federal Parliament (Bundestag), on 4 April 2024. The meeting took place at Schwabe's constituency office in Recklinghausen, Germany.

Habip Oğlu, who conveyed the current issues of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, especially those related to freedom of association, indicated that Greece denies the existence of the Turkish community in the country, and that Greece is persistently not executing the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (EctHR) with respect to the Xanthi Turkish Union, Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi and the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association for the past 16



years, despite all the warnings of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

Noting that the organisations representing the Turkish community in Western Thrace, especially ABTF, and the members of Parliament and mayors belonging to the Turkish

community are targeted and stigmatised in the media, Habip Oğlu explained that the Turkish community in Western Thrace is portrayed as a "threat" and "danger" in politics and mainstream media in his own country.

Furthermore, Habip Oğlu stated that the rule of law has been systematically violated in Greece recently, and that according to a recent survey, only 3 out of every 10 people in the country say they trust justice and judges, and pointed out that the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU), of which Greece is also a member, are closely monitoring this negative situation. Noting that the European Parliament adopted a resolution in February 2024 regarding serious developments that threaten the rule of law in Greece and called on the European Commission to take action, Habip Oğlu said that, as highlighted in the resolution, democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are lately under serious threat in Greece.

The difference is goodwill!

Dear readers,

I visited Romania and Bulgaria as the Spokesman of the Working Group of Turkic Minorities/Communities (TAG), which we founded during my tenure as FUEN Vice-President under the umbrella of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), of which we are a member.

Our aim is to introduce FUEN, the largest organisation that gathers national minorities living in Europe under its roof, and to include our Turkic kinsmen in Romania and Bulgaria into the FUEN family.

Among the 20 recognised minority groups in Romania, Tatars, and Turks, who are of Turkic descent, are recognised by the state, and minority rights are guaranteed by the Constitution.

According to the census conducted in 2021, in Romania, which has a population of 19 million, there are 20 thousand Turks and 18 thousand Tatars, according to official data. However, since this census was conducted electronically during the pandemic, Tatars and Turks indicate that they have a population much higher than this figure, and estimate the total population of Tatars and Turks in the country to be between 80 and 100 thousand.

Both of them, like other recognised minorities in the country, have seats in the Romanian Parliament. Indeed, a quota of one member of Parliament is allocated to represent all recognised minorities in the country in Parliament.

There is even the National Council of Minorities, which includes all minority MPs. All decisions regarding minorities are first passed through this council.

In addition, minorities in the country work in public institutions and organisations, even becoming deputy ministers is possible. An annual budget is allocated from the treasury to all minority groups in proportion to their population.

As an example, the current President, Klaus

Iohannis, belongs to the German minority. He was first elected in 2014 and has been president for two terms.

In our country, minorities in the country are not recognised, and a 3 percent threshold is applied throughout the country to prevent minorities from being represented. As the Turkish community in Western Thrace, it is even denied that we identify as "Turks".

In Bulgaria, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is represented in Parliament with 36 deputies, according to the 2023 election results. MRF has a say in the administration as the fourth largest party in the country.

Turks in Bulgaria also have very broad rights in the religious field. The Office of the Grand Mufti of Bulgaria is an institution recognised by the state. The Muslim community's own organisation and functioning are carried out freely with 20 muftis in 28 provinces.

In the elections held every five years, the President and members of the Supreme Muslim Council, the Grand Mufti and the regional muftis are elected by the delegates sent by 1400 registered mosque associations.

The Office of the Grand Mufti receives a share from the state budget in proportion to the number of the Muslim population. In addition, all revenues of the foundations are collected by the Office of the Grand Mufti and distributed to the community according to need.

Romania and Bulgaria became members of the EU in 2007. Our country became an EU member in 1981.

While these two countries were transitioning from communism to democracy, they accepted the existence of minorities living in their countries and adopted laws that tolerate and protect the different languages, religions, cultures, and identities in their country.

None of these exist in my country, why?



What is the difference between these two countries and my country?

The difference is goodwill!

Take a look at Romania and Bulgaria. Did the minorities living in these two countries, whether they were recognised as minorities or not, defy the territorial integrity of their countries and take over the country? When they were granted broad rights, did they abuse them and betray their country?

No!

On the contrary, as the constituent elements of the countries they live in, they demanded their rights and freedoms for an equal and free life in their own countries, that's all! When these freedoms were ensured, we saw that none of the fear scenarios came true.

So, the main thing is a well-intentioned approach! There is no reason why the current issues cannot be solved the day our country recognises our existence and identity in this country and sees us as a real source of enrichment for the country!

But... When there is no good will, an as-if approach arises, problems are not solved, new ones are added every day.

It is up to us to fight to make our voices heard in every field. As we always do!

Greetings and yours sincerely,

Halit Habip Oğlu
ABTTF President

ABTF organised a fact-finding mission to Western Thrace with the participation of foreign experts from Europe

The experts participating in the fact-finding mission observed on-site the issues of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and the rights violations they are subjected to.

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTF) organised a fact-finding mission to the Western Thrace region of Greece with a delegation of academics and experts from Europe on 4 March 2024.

International Relations Director Melek Kırmacı Arık, representing ABTF, Head of the Cluster “Danish-German Minorities Issues” of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) and Associate Professor of the University of Southern Denmark Dr. Martin Klatt and Petranka Nedelcheva and Magdalena Marinova from the National Museum of History of Bulgaria (HYSTORYSMUS) participated in the fact-finding mission.



Within the framework of the organisation and programme prepared by ABTF, the delegation first visited the Elected Mufti of Komotini and Chairman of the Western Thrace Turkish Minority Advisory Board (BT-TADK) Ibrahim Şerif in his office and was informed about the systematic violation of the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and the issues they are faced with in the field of religion. Immediately afterwards, the delegation vi-

sited the headquarters of the Friendship Equality and Peace (FEP) Party in Komotini, which is the political representative of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and was informed about the targeting of politicians belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace and the 3% election threshold applied to independent candidates throughout Greece and other related issues.

During the delegation's visits to the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA), the Culture and Education Foundation of Western Thrace Minority (PEKEM) and the Western Thrace Turkish Teachers Union (BTTÖB), the issues faced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the field of education, as well as the closure of autonomous Turkish elementary schools and the refusal of the Greek authorities to allow the opening of bilingual Turkish minority



kindergartens in the region were discussed.

Furthermore, the delegation visited the Komotini Turkish Youth Union (GTGB), which was banned because it bears the word "Turk" in its name and was briefed regarding the history and activities of the association.

The delegation met with Elected Mufti of Xanthi Mustafa Trampa in his office and the activities of the mufti office were explained

to the delegation. It was indicated that with the law titled "Modernisation of the Mufti Offices in Thrace", there are attempts at disbanding completely the autonomous structures of the mufti offices belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

Moreover, the delegation paid a visit to the Xanthi Turkish Union (ITB) and learned about the legal struggle of the association, which was banned due to the word

"Turkish" in its name, which has been going on for more than 40 years, and Greece's failure to execute the relevant judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) for the past 16 years.

The delegation also visited Gündem and Millet newspapers and was briefed about the discrimination and hate speech targeting the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the mainstream media in Greece.

The preliminary meeting of the EU project titled "B-SHAPES" was held in Komotini



The preliminary meeting of the European Union (EU) project titled "B-SHAPES - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies", in which the Turkish community in Western Thrace is also included, was held on 5 March 2024 in Komotini, with the initiative of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTF).

At the acquaintance and preliminary meeting held in English with the focus group established within the scope of the pro-

ject and consisting of members of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, the themes of perceptions about being a minority in the border region and understanding the issues of the Turkish community in Western Thrace were discussed.

At the meeting, the leader of the project, Head of the Cluster "Danish-German Minorities Issues" of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) and Associate Professor of the University of Southern Denmark

Dr. Martin Klatt realised a presentation with respect to the project to be implemented in the Hungary-Slovakia, Austria-Italy, Germany-Denmark, Czechia-Poland and Greece-Bulgaria border regions and further touched upon the contribution of the Turkish community in Western Thrace to the project.

Petranka Nedelcheva and Magdalena Marinova from the National Museum of History of Bulgaria (HYSTORYSMUS), one of the partners of the project, also attended the meeting.

Turkic minorities and communities in Romania and Bulgaria and the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece



ABTTF President and TAG Spokesman: "The main point is a well-intentioned approach! There is no reason why the current issues cannot be solved the day our country recognises our existence, our identity and sees us as real wealth! Without good will, issues are not solved, new ones are added to existing ones every day. It is up to us to fight to make our voices heard in every field. As we always do!"

The Working Group of Turkic Minorities/Communities (TAG) within the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), the largest umbrella organisation of national and autochthonous minorities in Europe in which the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) is a full member, paid a working visit to Romania and Bulgaria on 8-12 May 2024.

ABTTF President and TAG Spokesman Halit Habip Oğlu met with representatives of Turkic minorities and communities living in Romania and Bulgaria during his working visit.

Habip Oğlu, who met with the Democratic Turkish Union of Romania, Democratic Union of Turkic-Muslim Tatars of Romania and FUEN member Tatar Democratic Union in Romania, pursued his visit in Bulgaria where he attended a joint meeting in the city of Shumen in Bulgaria with the BIZ Association operating in the region of Deliorman, Association of Turkish Teachers of Northern



and Eastern Bulgaria, Tunahan Association, Güneş Association and Cem Association.

During his visit to Bulgaria, Habip Oğlu also met with Shumen Regional Mufti Mesut Hasan in his office. Assessing his working visit to Romania and Bulgaria, ABTTF President and TAG Spokesman Halit Habip Oğlu made the fol-

lowing statement: "I went on a working visit to Romania and Bulgaria and met with our Turkic compatriots living in these countries. Among the 20 recognised minority groups in Romania, Turks and Tatars are officially recognised by the state and minority rights are guaranteed by the Constitution. Turks and Tatars, like other recognised minorities in the country, have seats in the Romanian national parliament. Likewise, the Greek minority, which is one of the officially recognised minorities in the country, has a population of 2,086. A quota of one member of parliament is allocated for all recognised minorities in the country to be represented in the national parliament. There is even the National Council of Minorities, which includes all minority MPs. All decisions regarding minorities are first passed through this council. Minorities in the country work in public institutions and organisations, even serving as deputy ministers. All recognised minority groups are allocated an annual budget from the treasury in proportion to their population. The current President is Klaus Iohannis, who belongs to the German minority. Iohannis, who was first elected President in 2014, has been president for two terms. In our country Greece, minorities are not recognised, and in order to prevent minorities from being represented, a 3 percent election threshold is applied throughout the country, which is valid for independent candidates as well as political parties. The ethnic "Turkish" identity of our community is

denied. In Bulgaria, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is represented in the national parliament with 36 deputies, according to the 2023 election results, and has a say in the government as the fourth largest political party in the country. The Office of the Grand Mufti of Bulgaria is an institution recognised by the state. The President and members of the Supreme Holy Council of the Muslim Community, who are elected by the votes of the delegates sent by 1400 registered mosque associations in the elections held every five years, elect the Grand Mufti and regional muftis. The Office of the Grand Mufti receives a share from the state budget in proportion to the number of Muslim populations. In addition, all revenues of the foundations are collected by the Office of the Grand Mufti and distributed to the community according to their needs. Romania and Bulgaria became members of the EU in 2007. Our country became an EU member in 1981. While transitioning from communism to democracy, these two countries ac-

cepted the existence of minorities, tolerated



different languages, religions, cultures, and identities in their lands and adopted laws that protected them. However, I regret to say that none of these are available in my country. What is the difference between these two countries and my country? The difference is that there is no goodwill in my country! Did the minorities living in Romania and Bulgaria, whether they were officially recognised as minorities or not, defy the territorial integrity of their countries and take over the country? When they were granted broad rights, did they abuse them and betray their country? No! They simply demanded their rights and freedoms for an equal and free life in their country. Therefore, the main point is a well-intentioned approach! There is no reason why the current issues cannot be solved the day our country recognises our existence, our identity and sees us as real wealth! Without good will, issues are not solved, new ones are added to existing ones every day. It is up to us to fight to make our voices heard in every field. As we always do!

Western Thrace Turkish delegation at the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) and the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA), representing the Turkish community in Western Thrace, attended the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) held in Vienna, the capital of Austria, on 22-23 April 2024.

K. Engin Soyyilmaz from ABTTF and WTMUGA Member Kerem Abdurahimoğlu represented the Turkish community in Western Thrace at the first Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of the year titled "The Role of Civil Society in the Promotion and Protection of International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law" and organised by the Malta OSCE Chairmanship and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR),



ly in Greece, where the Turkish community in Western Thrace lives, noting that although the execution of ECtHR judgments in a country is one of the most important indicators of respect for the principle of the rule of law, Greece has persistently failed to execute the three relevant judgments with respect to the associations of the Turkish community in Western Thrace for the past 16 years, despite all the warnings of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Underscoring that non-governmen-

tal organisations and representatives of the Turkish community in Western Thrace defending their rights are constantly subjected to pressure and intimidation and stigmatised in Greece, ABTTF once again reiterated the case against Ozan Ahmetoğlu, President of the Xanthi Turkish Union, and the opening of an investigation against Ibrahim Şerif, the Elected Mufti of Komotini, for alleged "usurpation of authority" as an example. ABTTF called on Greece to execute the ECtHR judgments on the three aforementioned associations of the Turkish community in Western Thrace as a matter of urgency, and asked ODIHR to closely monitor the state of the rule of law in Greece in close cooperation and dialogue with the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

Using its right of reply at the end of both sessions, Greece repeated its official thesis that according to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, there is solely a Muslim minority in Thrace, claiming that the Minority's freedom of association was respected and that the Minority did not experience discrimination.

ABTF attended the 6th annual meeting of FUEN's Education Working Group

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTF) attended the 6th Annual Meeting of the Education Working Group of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), of which it is a full member which was held in Helsinki, the capital of Finland, on 9-10 April 2024. Deniz Servantie from ABTF Brussels Office attended the meeting titled "Primary school - primary level in minority education" hosted by the Swedish minority in Finland.

At the meeting, ABTF conveyed the issues faced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the field of education and the work carried out by international organisations regarding these issues to the representatives of other minorities in Europe who are members of FUEN.

During the first session of the meeting, which was also attended by Gösta Toft, Vice President of FUEN, and Daniel Alfreider, Vice President of FUEN and Spokesperson for the FUEN Education Working Group, Niklas Wahlström, Responsible for the Professional Education Sector at Svenska Förskolornas Vanner, and Gun Oker-Blom, Former Director of the Finnish Education Agency and Education Consultant, shared the current issues of the Swedish minority in Finland in the field of education and the current situation regarding bilingual education with the minority.

In the second session of the meeting, representatives of participating FUEN member minorities delivered their presentations about the issues of the minorities they belong to in education, focusing on the primary school level.

In its presentation at this session, ABTF conveyed the historical development of the educational autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, which is guaranteed by the treaties, and the issues related to the primary schools with autonomous status noting that between 1923 and 1967, the schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace were recognised by the Greek state as "Turkish schools",



but this reminding that this was later changed by the Colonels' Junta, ABTF noted that despite the restoration of democracy in Greece in 1974, the educational autonomy of the Turkish community has gradually eroded by various laws and practices.

Furthermore, ABTF indicated that the Greek state denies the identity and existence of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and pointed out that the Turkish community faces discrimination at all levels in equal access to education. Noting that the curriculum at the primary school level was prepared without the approval and contribution of teachers belonging to the Turkish community, that Turkish lessons have gradually decreased in recent years, and that Turkish primary schools with autonomous status have been systematically closed down, ABTF added that while the Turkish community had 226

primary schools in 2003, this number was reduced due to the closures made by the Greek authorities in violation of educational autonomy and it was reminded that the number dropped to 90 in the 2023-2024 school year. Highlighting that the educational issues of the Turkish community in Western Thrace were brought to the agenda through questions for written answer and petitions before the European Parliament (EP), ABTF called on Greece to restore the educational autonomy of the Turkish community and to end the closure of Turkish primary schools in Western Thrace.

On the second day of the event, participants visited the Mattlidens Lågstadium primary school belonging to the Swedish minority in Finland.

In the last session of the meeting, Francesca Borgonovi, OECD Head of the Skills Analysis team and honorary professor at Social Research Institute at University College of London, realised a presentation on the future of education in Sweden in 2024 and how it could be improved.

Prime Minister Mitsotakis paid a visit to Ankara

ABTTF President: "As our Prime Minister pointed out, as the Turkish community in Western Thrace, we are a bridge of friendship and peace between our country and our motherland, and we believe that if the government shows the will, our issues will definitely be solved through dialogue and good will. At this point, we invite our Prime Minister, as the head of the government, to take responsibility immediately."

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis paid an official visit to Ankara on 13 May 2024, upon the invitation of the President of the Republic of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Prime Minister Mitsotakis met with President Erdoğan at the Presidential Complex in Beştepe. After the meeting, President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Mitsotakis held a joint press conference.

Indicating that rapprochement and cooperation are for the benefit of the people of the two countries, President Erdoğan also touched upon the Turkish community in Western Thrace in his speech. Noting that they perceive the minority as a bridge of human friendship between the two countries, Erdoğan explained the following: "We expect the positive atmosphere in our relations to contribute to meeting the rights of our Turkish minorities and compatriots in Greece. The Turkish minority in Greece and the Greek minority in Türkiye are the building blocks of our human and cultural richness. Increasing the peace and welfare of minorities will positively affect our relations. I expressed our expectations for the improvements required by international law in the situation of the Turkish Minority in Western Thrace".

In his speech, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis thanked him and his delegation for the hospitality shown to him and responded to President Erdoğan's words about the Turkish community in Western Thrace. Stating that he sincerely believes that the minorities in Greece, which were determined by the Treaty of Lausanne, are a bridge of friendship between the two peoples, Mitsotakis added the following: "Although it has significantly shrunk in terms of population, the Greek minority enriches the cultural and



social life of Türkiye. However, in order to continue this, it needs the help of the Turkish state. In Thrace, our Christian and Muslim citizens live in harmony with the equal opportunities provided to them by Greece and the European Union. I can assure you that I, too, remain fixed on this goal. As I said, the definition of the minority as a religious minority is clearly determined in the Treaty of Lausanne. Ensuring the peace of the Muslim minority in Thrace by the Greek state is possible by implementing equality before the law. At the same time, some special precautions are being taken for Muslims in our country. We see the active participation of the Muslim minority in Greek political and cultural life as a success. It would be great if the ever-decreasing Greek minority in Türkiye had the same situation."

"Despite the differences of opinion and disagreements on some basic issues, it is gratifying and promising for the future of relations between the two countries that the leaders of our motherland and our country have declared that they want to continue to stay at the dialogue table. However, the Prime Minister of our country unfortunately once again went down the path of denying the existence and identity of our community at the meeting in Ankara, as this was

the case at the meeting held in Athens last December. Prime Minister Mitsotakis, who mentioned the "Greek minority" in our motherland and emphasised ethnic identity in his speech, ignored our Turkish identity by using the phrase "Muslim minority in Thrace" when it comes to us. However, as our Prime Minister himself knows very well, the phrase "non-Muslim minorities" is included in the Treaty of Lausanne alone and only. We would like to remind our Prime Minister of this fact once again. Our Prime Minister claims that our community actively participates in Greek political and cultural life with equal opportunities provided by our country and the European Union, but in reality, the opposite is happening. The educational and religious autonomy of our community, guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne, have been largely usurped today. Our country, which has not applied the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights with respect to our three associations for the past 16 years despite all the warnings of the Council of Europe continues to disregard international law and the principle of the rule of law. As our Prime Minister pointed out, as the Turkish community in Western Thrace, we are a bridge of friendship and peace between our country and our motherland, and we believe that if the government shows the will, our issues will definitely be solved through dialogue and good will. At this point, we invite our Prime Minister, as the head of the government, to take responsibility immediately", said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).
*Image: www.anadoluimages.com

The Deputy Director of Education of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace ignored the educational autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace



ABTF President: "It is our country that does not comply with the treaties by violating our educational autonomy, which was guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne and functioned well from 1923 to 1977, with unilateral laws and practices! If our country restores our educational autonomy, all existing issues will be solved by themselves."

Deputy Director of Education of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace Meri Kosmidou wrote an article in Turkish and Greek about the education of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

According to *Gündem* newspaper, in the article titled "Five facts about minority education", Kosmidou touched upon the public and minority schools operating in the Western Thrace region and the number of pupils studying in these schools, the issue of closed schools, the number of pupils and classrooms in public and minority schools and further referred to the issue of school expenses and the money spent from the state budget for mobile education.

President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe Halit Habip Oğlu (ABTF) directly responded to Kosmidou's article, which ignores the educational autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and reflects the official view of the state and does not include the educational demands of the Turkish community's institutions and organisations in any way.

First fact: Kosmidou indicated that there are 311 public primary schools in Western Thrace, where 15,250 pupils receive education without discrimination of religion, and that a total of 90 minority primary schools are operating within the framework of the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne and related education protocols, 47 in the prefecture of Rodopi, 34 in the prefecture of Xanthi and 9 in the prefecture of Evros. She further noted that a total of 3,255 pupils are studying in primary schools.

Habip Oğlu: "Although we have educational autonomy in accordance with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, our educational autonomy

has been usurped by unilateral laws and circulars since 1972. Until 1977, teachers' salaries for Turkish lessons in our bilingual schools were paid by the boards elected by parents. This was even the case between 1967 and 1974, when the military junta was in power in our country."

Second fact: Kosmidou notes that the population is decreasing in the Western Thrace region, as in other parts of Greece, and accordingly, the number of pupils is decreasing, there can be no school without pupils, so schools that are below the number of pupils considered critical are merged to have the minimum number of pupils required.

Habip Oğlu: "Demographic decline constitutes an important issue not only in our country, but also in other European Union Member States and neighbouring countries, but the main reason for the low number of pupils in our elementary schools in our villages in Western Thrace is not the decrease in the population here, but the fact that parents prefer public schools. The reason for this

preference is also due to the decrease in the quality of education in our schools with the transfer of our autonomous schools to state control".

Third fact: Kosmidou claims that minority education has many privileges, for example, noting that the limit for suspending school activities for public schools is one teacher per classroom and a total of 15 pupils, while the limit for minority schools is two teachers per classroom and a total of 9 pupils, so that these schools are still operating when many minority schools need to discontinue their activities.

Habip Oğlu: "Yes, minority education has many privileges, such as providing bilingual education in both our mother tongue and the language of our country in our schools. If our country had restored our educational autonomy, the number of pupils in our schools and therefore the number of classrooms would have increased".

Fourth fact: Kosmidou underscores that while the activities of 19 public schools were suspended in 2023 due to the privileged treatment of minority schools, only 9 minority schools were suspended during the same period, adding that 70% of minority schools in (Western) Thrace are small minority schools, and only 7% of public schools are small public schools.

Habip Oğlu: "Since 1977, when our educati-

onal autonomy was usurped and our schools came under state control, the number of pupils in our elementary schools in our villages has been constantly decreasing. In addition, there is not a single Turkish kindergarten in the prefecture of Rodopi, where we constitute the majority of the population, and in the prefecture of Xanthi, where we constitute about half of the population. The number of state kindergartens in each of these two prefectures is 141. Furthermore, there are 25 public secondary schools and high schools in prefecture of Rodopi and 32 public secondary schools and high schools in prefecture of Xanthi, while there is only one Turkish minority secondary school and high school in these two prefectures. While we had 226 elementary schools throughout our region in 2003, this number has decreased to 90 in the 2023-2024 school year. If the state had heard our fair demand that we have expressed for many years and restored our educational autonomy, the classrooms in our schools would be worth more, and our schools would be more than public schools in direct proportion to the population ratio in these two prefectures."

Fifth fact: Kosmidou notes that the Greek state fully covers the transportation costs of minority students and the operating costs of minority schools, including cleaning, but this financing is managed by the relevant boards, whose members are parents of the pupils and again elected by them, suggesting that this also has a clear impact on the

equipment of minority schools and ultimately makes some minority schools superior to public schools in terms of equipment. Claiming that Greece complies with the Treaty of Lausanne and the educational protocols with full respect and creates an impressively privileged support framework for minority education that minorities deserve, Kosmidou states that they have to offer the best environment for all children to develop their skills and abilities, whether in a public school or a minority school.

Habip Oğlu: "Kosmidou's comparison of the equipment of our elementary schools with that of public schools is completely absurd and preposterous. It is our country that does not comply with the treaties by violating our educational autonomy, which was guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne and functioned well from 1923 to 1977, with unilateral laws and practices! If our country restores our educational autonomy, all existing issues will be solved by themselves. Kosmidou says that only the children and their future are important, and the identity of the pupils should be respected. We expect Kosmidou to demonstrate this in practice, not just in words, as an authority holder, and we recommend her to study the minority education model in the German-Danish border region, where full respect for the identity of the pupils is shown and bilingual education is perfectly implemented, as a best practice".

*Image/SOURCE: www.gundemgazetesi.com



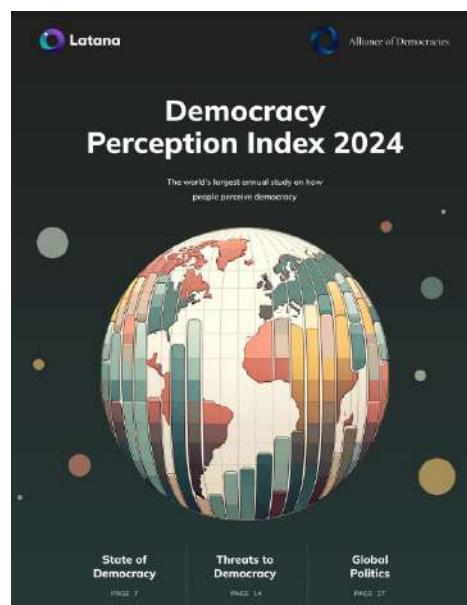


51% of people in Greece complain about the democracy deficit

According to the results of an international survey measuring the Democracy Perception Index (DPI), which was conducted between February and April 2024 with the participation of 63,000 people from 53 countries, including 15 member states of the European Union (EU), including Greece, it was revealed that on average 85% of the public consider democracy as being important.

Greece is defined as the “cradle of democracy” in the survey, which ranks first, where 94% of the public think democracy is important. However, 51% of the people in Greece allude to the democratic deficit. For the third year in a row, economic inequality (68%) is still perceived as the number one threat to democracy globally, followed by corruption (67%) and the influence of global corporations (60%).

The Democracy Perception Index (DPI) is the largest annual survey of people's perceptions of democracy, covering 53 countries representing more than 75% of the world's population, and aims to understand how people around the world perceive the current state of democracy in their countries and the major challenges ahead.



“The fact that more than half of the people in our country complain about the democratic deficit is a very serious warning to the government. The recent legal scandals and systematic violation of the rule of law in our country have seriously shaken people's trust in justice, judges, and democracy. The legal system in our country is under the influence of politics to a degree that it has not been in recent years, and those who hold the executive power use strategic cases with political

motives as a tool of intimidation. Our community's associations and representatives who defend their rights have been subjected to constant pressure and stigmatisation through strategic lawsuits filed against them for years. Even though it was officially registered, two lawsuits were filed against the Western Thrace Fenerbahçe Culture and Sports Association, demanding the revocation of its registration, or against the Mufti of Komotini İbrahim Şerif, elected by the Western Thrace Turks, on the allegation of “usurpation of office”, despite the judgment of the ECtHR on the same issue against our country dated March 2000. The opening of an investigation once again in months are just two examples of these. The government should take the necessary steps without delay to restore people's trust in democracy and the legal system in our country, and should stop hiding behind excuses, taking into account constructive criticism from Europe and the international arena”, said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

Please click below for the results of the survey:
<https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/DPI-2024.pdf>

ABTTF Newsletter

ABTTF Newsletter, which has been distributed since May 2005, is published in Turkish, Greek, English and German.

ABTTF Newsletter covers matters of grave concern to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, current developments in Western Thrace and Greece, ABTTF's international activities and lobbying as well as the activities of ABTTF member associations and plays an important role in promoting the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

ABTTF Newsletter is sent to homes by mail and can also be obtained from our member associations.

In order to receive ABTTF Newsletter by mail and for further information on the newsletter:

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