



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

### Forty-fourth session

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Agenda item 9

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

## **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.

[04 June 2020]

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

GE.20-09374(E)



\* 2 0 0 9 3 7 4 \*

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## **Manifestations of racism and intolerance against the Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic**

As the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities stated member states should reach out to persons belonging to national minorities and to respond to their specific needs during the pandemic. However, it noted with that the crisis has exacerbated their vulnerability and deepened the already existing inequalities in the Council of Europe member States.<sup>1</sup>

The Committee said persons belonging to national minorities have often faced discrimination, hate speech and stigma, as well as a lack of relevant information in minority languages. Concerning the lack of information in minority languages, Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) has conducted a survey to analyse to what extent communication in minority languages is assured by diverse stakeholders in the Member States of the European Union. An online questionnaire was completed for 29 minority groups in 18 European countries and the questionnaire found out that only 21 percent of the countries in the survey provided official information in minority languages.<sup>2</sup>

In Greece, there is no official information provided in Turkish in the region, because the government only recognized a religious minority in the region, with the official use of the term as the Muslim minority in Thrace. The ethnic Turkish identity of the minority is not recognized and associations which bear the word “Turkish” in their titles were dissolved in 1986 and are not registered since then, although there are three European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgments on violation of the freedom of association in 2007 and 2008.

Due to non-recognition of the ethnic Turkish identity of the minority in the region, Turkish language is not used in any official documents, including official correspondences in the existing minority schools in their communication to their own students or governmental authorities. Under such circumstances there is no exceptional official information provided in Turkish targeting the people in the region in their decisions to implement confinement policies in specific Turkish villages in the region. General information on the coronavirus outbreak provided most often community organizations as well as minority press. This non-recognition of the community even during the time of the pandemic has deepened the feeling of insecurity and mistrust towards governmental authorities.

Intolerant discourse and scapegoating of minorities has been observed in many countries and there is a strongly shared concern that bias-motivated violence and discriminatory discourse and practices have reached a worrying point across Europe and in many other countries. The Turkish community in this trying period is being scapegoated for the high numbers of cases of COVID in the villages they live in with hate-motivated political statements and differentiated language in the media while reporting cases from the region.

We are fully aware that manifestations of racism and intolerance in the form of discrimination or hate crime and hate speech against persons belonging to ethnic and/or national, religious minorities has the potential to exacerbate in times of crisis with a less tolerant attitude towards the other. Political opportunism with racist and discriminatory statement of the head of the far-right Greek Solution Party targeting the Turkish community in Western Thrace through the coronavirus was met with a huge backlash among the Turkish community.

When Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis declared a nationwide curfew to prevent the coronavirus on 23 March 2020 due to the heightened risk of coronavirus, on the same day, the village of Echinós (Şahin) in Xanthi was the first village quarantined in the country after a 72-year-old man from the Turkish community in Western Thrace died. After the quarantine of the village of Echinós, Kyriakos Velopoulos, head of the far-right Greek Solution Party, said on Twitter, ‘Echinós is in Quarantine!!! Ankara’s spies live there, coming in and out of Turkey! Think about what it is in Erdoğan’s Turkey!’.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/acfc-statement-covid-19-and-national-minorities-28-05-2020-final-en/16809e8570>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fuen.org/en/article/Do-You-Speak-Corona-Many-European-countries-do-not-offer-information-on-the-pandemic-in-minority-languages>.

Moreover, on 12 May 2020, a fountain in the village of Nimfea (Yanıköy) in Komotini, Greece, which was built by a philanthropist belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, was damaged by unidentified persons. According to the newspaper *Gündem*, the fountain plate written in Turkish was removed on Tuesday night on 12 May 2020 and a slogan against the Turks was written with spray paint on the fountain. While shattering the marble plate where the name of the benevolent Western Thrace Turk who built the fountain and the construction date were shown, the unidentified persons wrote the slogan “Erdoğan Turks Nazi” on the fountain wall. We strongly condemn this abominable hate-motivated and racist attack which bears motifs of enmity against Turks and is clearly targeting the Turkish community in Western Thrace, and we want the perpetrator to be identified immediately by the police and brought to justice.

On the other side discriminatory practices concerning their own minority rights during the COVID-19 pandemic has created counter-productive effect on the Turkish community. Arbitrary restrictions in this time of crisis are questioned by the Turkish community and has increased the sense of fear and mistrust towards governmental authorities.

During the pandemic, the holy Ramadan started. But prohibitive actions against the traditional and cultural values of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece persisted under the pretext of the coronavirus pandemic. The Ramadan drummer announcing the *iftar* and *sahur* times was prevented from playing in the Western Thrace, especially in the villages where Turks and Greeks live together. In the villages of Topiros (İnhanlı) and Lefkopetra (Sakarkaya) in Xanthi (İskeçe) province, Ramadan drummers were reportedly warned by the police not to play the drum, otherwise that they would be fined for it. Similar issues regarding playing the Ramadan drum were also reported in other villages which have a mixed population in Xanthi province. Although the necessary permissions for playing the Ramadan drum were obtained from the municipal administrations by the board of trustees in these two villages and there is nothing unlawful, the police warning and hindering to play the Ramadan drum was met with opposition from the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

Moreover, due to the measures taken due to the virus, as in previous years, the Turkish community did not meet together at iftar tables or pray together in mosques in the region like other religious groups in the country. However, an imam belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece was called to testify on grounds of having led a collective prayer in the mosque where he is preaching albeit this is banned as a result of the coronavirus outbreak on 25 April 2020. According to the *Millet News*, in his explanation to the police, Ali Mahmut Paşa who has been working for many years as Imam in Hebilköy (Hloi) village, which is bound to Kozlukebir (Arriana) Municipality, indicated that there was absolutely no collective prayer within the mosque and that the video which had been shared on social media and shown as an alleged proof dates back at least 5 or 6 years. In his statement to the police station director, Ali Mahmut Paşa said that within the framework of the measures taken in Greece against the coronavirus outbreak, neither prayers nor Friday prayers have been conducted collectively in the village mosque for the last six weeks.<sup>3</sup>

During this period, the Appointed Deputy Mufti of Rodopi Cihad Halil designated by the Greek government, appointed new imams to the mosque located in the neighbourhood of Harmanlık in Komotini (Gümülcine) and Hamidiye Mosque in Sapes (Şapcı) albeit the Turkish community in Western Thrace had not made such request and has not shown consent in that respect. Although the imams elected and supported by the community and the board of trustees are serving in both mosques, these appointments by the government-appointed deputy mufti were met with strong criticism for the Turkish community in Western Thrace. The residents of the neighbourhood of Harmanlık started a signature campaign against this appointment by upholding and defending their imam Nihat Kaplan elected by the village community and served under the Mufti elected by the Turkish community. This is commented by community members that the government-appointed deputy mufti has taken an opportunistic step while all people stayed at their homes for the

Manifestations of racism and intolerance in the form of discrimination or hate crime against persons belonging to national minorities and other marginalized groups threaten the security

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.milletnews.com/view.php?id=1210>.

of individuals, communities and societies. Greece should ensure that the Turkish community in Western Thrace is empowered to engage actively in protection of its specific minority rights granted by international treaties and its social, economic, political and cultural rights during pandemic and the post-pandemic period. The Government should take result-oriented measures for eliminating discrimination and intolerance against the Turkish community as part of an overall governmental policy for the promotion and protection of minority rights even in the times of crisis.

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