



Federation of Western Thrace Turks

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe

European Federation of Western Thrace Turks

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NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Member of the Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
Member of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN)
Member of the European Language Equality Network (ELEN)

Current Problems of the Turkish Community in Western Thrace in Greece

About ABTTF:

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) is an international non-governmental organisation established in Germany on 28 February 1988 to raise awareness internationally about the discrimination and racism faced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece. Today, with its headquarters in Germany and representative offices in Brussels and Athens, it is the international representative of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

About the Turkish Community in Western Thrace:

Under the treaties signed by Türkiye and Greece, the Turkish population in Western Thrace and the Greek Orthodox population in Istanbul, Gökçeada and Bozcaada were excluded from the compulsory exchange of populations between the two countries. The legal status of the Turkish community in Western Thrace was defined by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which granted autonomy in the fields of education and religion.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne granted the Turkish community in Western Thrace “minority” status. Under the Treaty of Lausanne, the Turkish community in Western Thrace has the right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.

However, the autonomy granted to the Turkish community in the fields of education and religion by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne has been undermined over the years by arbitrary regulations and practices; in practice, it has been largely eliminated.

Denial of Ethnic Turkish Identity

The Turkish community in Western Thrace today has a population of approximately 150,000. Greece denies the ethnic identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace on grounds that the Treaty of Lausanne refers to a “Muslim minority”. On the other hand, Greece uses the term “Greek minority in Istanbul” for the non-Muslim minority in Türkiye, whose status and rights are defined by the same treaty.

The “Etabli Documents” issued to those excluded from the population exchange in Western Thrace stipulate that the Muslims in Western Thrace are ethnically “Turkish” but Greece denies their “Turkish” identity. However, it was the Greek governments of the 1950s that used the term “Turkish” instead of “Muslim”.

Deprivation of Citizenship

The former Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship Law (No. 3370) explicitly contains racist statements and divides Greek citizens into two categories: ethnic Greeks and non-ethnic Greeks. Between 1955 and 1998,

approximately 60,000 Western Thrace Turks were stripped of their citizenship. Today, those who remain stateless in Greece and those who lost their Greek citizenship and left Greece to acquire the citizenship of another country (in this case, mostly Turkish citizenship) do not have the right to regain Greek citizenship.

Not only those who were stripped of their citizenship, but also their descendants have been deprived of Greek citizenship and have lost the benefits of being EU citizens.

Violations of Freedom of Association

In order to deny the ethnic Turkish identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, the Xanthi Turkish Union (1927), the Komotini Turkish Youth Union (1928) and the Western Thrace Turkish Teachers' Union (1936), all of which had the word "Turkish" in their names, had their signboards removed on grounds that they threatened public order, despite having operated legally for many years. In 1986, they were dissolved.

One of the three aforementioned associations, the Xanthi Turkish Union, appealed to the European Court of Human Rights after a 22-year legal battle. Following the rejection of their registration applications by local courts, the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association, established in 1995, and the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi, established in 2001, also appealed to the ECtHR.

In these three cases, now known as the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases, the ECtHR ruled in 2007 and 2008 that Greece had violated Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which concerns freedom of assembly and association. ([https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-82663%22\]}}\)](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-82663%22]})

Three ECtHR judgments in the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases have not been executed for the past 17 years. In light of the ECtHR judgments and case-law, local courts have not re-opened the local cases. Following the 2017 amendment to the Code of Civil Procedure, the Court of Cassation again rejected the applicants' claims, basing its reasoning on the allegation that the use of the term "Turkish" was contrary to the Treaty of Lausanne.

This group of cases has been politicised rather than legalised, and over the past 17 years, steps have been taken to prolong the process before the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe rather than executing the ECtHR judgments. As stated in the Committee of Ministers' CM/Del/Dec (2023)1483/H46 meeting on 15 December 2023, Greece has declared its intention to establish an Committee of Experts to make progress on the execution of the judgments in the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases and appointed the Chair of the Committee on 15 April 2024.

Due to uncertainty surrounding the establishment and functioning of the Committee of Experts, tasked with researching and making recommendations on the execution of the ECtHR judgments, the process was conducted in a vague manner during this period. One year after the Committee's establishment, the Committee of Experts completed its report; however, instead of addressing the execution of the three ECtHR judgments pertaining to the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases, the Committee of Experts developed recommendations concerning the general execution of the ECtHR judgments; it remains unclear how these decisions will be evaluated by the Greek government.

The Committee of Ministers, in its decision following the meeting held on 10-12 June 2025, requested that the Greek authorities immediately examine the recommendations in the report of the Committee of Experts they had established, and to swiftly take the necessary measures within a clear and specific timeframe to ensure *restitutio in integrum* for the applicants and to effectively prevent similar violations.

The Committee of Ministers encouraged the Greek authorities to make full use of the assistance and expertise of the Council of Europe in this area, including the Venice Commission, to ensure that the proposed measures comply with the standards of the European Convention on Human Rights, and decided to continue examining the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases at its meeting in December 2025 to review the progress achieved.

The Permanent Representation of Greece to the Council of Europe sent a communication to the Committee of Ministers (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/cm/-/1545th-human-rights-meeting-of-the-ministers-deputies-2-4-december-2025>) on this matter. This communication, which was a great disappointment to us, informed that Greece had decided to undertake a second legislative reform following the amendment to the Code of Civil Procedure in 2017. The decision to undertake a second legislative reform is yet another step aimed at prolonging the process before the Committee of Ministers. Moreover, in its decision of June 2025, the Committee of Ministers also requested Greece to communicate a clear and definite timetable for the steps it would take; however, the communication sent by the Permanent Representation of Greece to the Council of Europe did not include a timetable for implementation.

While the ECtHR judgments were not executed in the Bekir-Ousta group of cases, a sports association was established in Komotini in 2022 by supporters of Fenerbahçe Sports Club, a sports club in Türkiye, under the name “Western Thrace Fenerbahçe Association”. It was ordered to be closed by the Rodopi First Instance Prosecutor’s Office at a hearing on 28 May 2024. It was argued that the phrase “Western Thrace” in the association's name, was contrary to the law and public order, and that the use of the term “Western Thrace” posed a threat to the country’s territorial integrity and national sovereignty.

While the execution of the European Court of Human Rights judgments regarding the Bekir-Ousta group of cases has been pending for 16 years, the decision to dissolve the Western Thrace Fenerbahçe Culture and Sports Association is not only a violation of the freedom to form associations of the Turkish community in Western Thrace but also a clear attack on the rights and freedoms of our community.

In connection with the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases, in 2010, the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Xanthi’s application for registration with the relevant local court was rejected on grounds that the word “Turkish” in the name was “misleading and could create problems in terms of public order”. Upon this, the association’s founders appealed to the ECtHR; In the case of Sagir and Others v. Greece (Application No. 34724/18), the ECtHR ruled unanimously on 24 June 2025 that Greece had violated Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) on freedom of association.

The ECtHR stipulated that the Greek authorities’ justification for refusing to register this association was based on the “need to distinguish between the recognised Muslim minority and the unrecognised Turkish minority” in the country, noting that the Treaty of Lausanne recognised the Muslim minority living in Greece, but clearly emphasised that individuals cannot be prevented from declaring their ethnic identity. The Court ruled that the expression of “Turkish” identity, not just Muslim identity, in the association’s name could not be considered a threat to a democratic society and that there was no concrete evidence that the association’s name threatened public order. ([https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-243777%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-243777%22]}))

With the Sagir judgment, the ECtHR addressed the same fundamental issue as the Bekir-Ousta group of cases, indicating that the dissolution of the associations with the word “Turkish” in their names or lawsuits regarding their registration applications are not individual or isolated cases but actually point to the existence of a systematic problem.

Therefore, as we have stated before and as seen in today’s Sagir judgment, similar violations will continue to occur if the judgments on the Bekir-Ousta group of cases are not executed.

This is because, as stated in the chapter on Greece of the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report 2025 (https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en), the judgments in the Bekir-Ousta and Others group of cases have been awaiting execution for 16 years.

The Right to Education in One’s Mother Tongue and the Destruction of the Autonomous Education System

The Treaty of Lausanne granted the Turkish community in Western Thrace the right to education in their mother tongue, Turkish, guaranteeing the right to Turkish-language education in their own schools. This autonomy in education was reinforced by bilateral agreements between Türkiye and Greece, thereby

granting the Turkish community in Western Thrace the right to establish, manage and supervise schools offering bilingual education in Turkish and Greek in the prefectures of Rodopi, Xanthi and Evros.

However, over time, legislative changes and arbitrary practices have effectively eliminated the autonomous status of schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, transforming them into schools managed under the supervision and control of the state.

a) The lack of bilingual kindergartens

Law No. 3518/2006 made pre-school education compulsory in the country. The educational autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace was not taken into account, meaning that no separate provision was made for Turkish children with a different mother tongue when the law was implemented.

This law was implemented for the Turkish community in Western Thrace from the 2011-2012 school year onwards, but when kindergarten education was made compulsory by the law, applications to establish Turkish kindergartens within the framework of educational autonomy were rejected.

Today, Turks constitute 55% of the population in Rodopi, 45% in Xanthi, and 10% in Evros. There are 43 public kindergartens in Rodopi, 49 in Xanthi, and 81 in Evros, but there is not a single kindergarten in any of these three prefectures that provides education in Turkish, the mother tongue.

The Culture and Education Foundation of Western Thrace Minority (CEFOM)¹, which operates in Western Thrace, has applied to open bilingual kindergartens in the villages of Thamna (Eşekçili) and Selero (Gökçeler) among the private kindergartens existing in Greece, but this has been rejected. Consequently, the matter has been taken to court.

On the other hand, the state does not prevent the existence of German or French kindergartens in the country. Foreign schools in the country do not interfere with pre-school education being provided in their own native languages within their own private school systems. Under these conditions, only children belonging to the Turkish Minority are denied the right to receive education in their own native language, Turkish, at the pre-school level.

This violates the principle of equality in education.

b) Structural problems in Turkish primary schools and the closure of primary schools

According to the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkish schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace are owned by the Turkish community in Western Thrace and had autonomous operation, meaning that all school expenses and management were also their responsibility.

As summarised above, due to state intervention in the autonomous Turkish school education system, significant damage has been caused over the years, and autonomy has been largely dismantled. Private and autonomous Turkish schools operate two separate curricula consisting of Turkish and Greek lessons. As the ethnic Turkish identity of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace is not recognised, two separate curricula are currently implemented in Turkish schools: the “Minority Programme”, as designated by the state, and “Greek”.

The Turkish curriculum in Turkish primary schools is designed without the approval or contribution of minority teachers. In these schools, the balance of hours per subject per language in minority education has shifted significantly in favour of the majority language over the years. Furthermore, teachers in the Greek curriculum do not know the mother tongue of Turkish students and have not received special training to teach in Turkish minority schools. Teachers in the Turkish curriculum are graduates of an old private pedagogy academy (SÖPA) in Thessaloniki, where Turkish was taught in very limited classes and there was no internal training programme.

Looking at the number of Turkish schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, a surprising overall picture emerges. While there were 305 Turkish primary schools in 1930, today there are 83. In particular, the temporary suspension of Turkish primary schools’ activities and their permanent

closure three years later, as part of the government's austerity measures in 2010, has become a systematic tool of discrimination.

In 2008, there were 194 minority primary schools in Western Thrace. Due to closures resulting from declining number of pupils, there were 188 in 2011, 170 in 2014, 164 in 2015, 133 in 2016, 130 in 2017, 128 in 2018, 123 in 2019, 115 in 2020, 103 in 2021, 99 in 2022, 90 in the 2023-2024 school year, 86 in 2024-2025, and 83 in 2025-2026.

c) Insufficient number of secondary schools

In the prefectures of Xanthi and Komotini, where the Turkish community of Western Thrace is concentrated, there are two Turkish secondary schools and high schools, as well as two religious schools. The biggest problem at secondary school level is the number of schools.

Western Thrace Turks constitute the majority in Rodopi and nearly half of the population in Xanthi. In contrast, while there is only one Turkish secondary school and high school in Rodopi, there are 14 public secondary schools and 9 public high schools, making a total of 23 public secondary schools and high schools.

There is also only one Turkish secondary school and high school in Xanthi. However, there are 20 public secondary schools and 9 state high schools. The total number of public secondary schools and high schools is 29.

In Evros, although Turks make up 10 per cent of the population, there is not a single Turkish middle school or high school. In contrast, there are 27 public middle schools and 15 state high schools in Meriç.

Although the two Turkish middle schools and high schools in Rodopi and Xanthi should be managed and operated like other private secondary schools in Greece, these two schools are also under state management and supervision.

The biggest problem at secondary level is the rejection of the request to allocate a new school for the Turkish secondary school in Xanthi.

The current building of the Xanthi Turkish Secondary and High School was constructed in the late 19th century and was used as a tobacco warehouse during the Ottoman period. The two-storey school building, which also has a basement, consists largely of timber and, in its current state, lacks the facilities to provide high-quality, modern education.

The Turkish community in Western Thrace has been requesting a new school building in Xanthi for years, but this demand has been persistently ignored.

There are two religious schools in the region, namely madrasas, which are part of the system inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Like other Turkish schools in the region, these religious schools belong to the Turkish community in Western Thrace and are secondary schools. Students are taught Greek, Arabic, English and Turkish, but over time, the number of subjects taught in Turkish has been reduced. In December 2020, the signboards of the madrasas in Komotini and Xanthi were changed, and the word "Minority" on the sign was replaced with "Muslim".

d) Issues in higher education

The Turkish community does not have its own university or departments offering Turkish-language education. There is only a 0.05% quota for Turkish children entering university. Due to the low quality of education in Turkish schools, this quota is not effectively implemented.

Violation of Freedom of Religion and Conscience and Religious Autonomy

The status and rights of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the religious sphere were determined by the 1830 Protocol, the 1881 Treaty, the 1913 Treaty of Athens, and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, granting the Turkish community autonomy in religious matters.

Although the election of religious leaders was incorporated into Greek domestic legislation in 1920 through a procedure allowing the Turkish community to appoint its own religious leaders, namely the muftis in Rodopi, Xanthi and Didymoteicho, Greece abolished this right by deciding to appoint muftis through the Presidential Decree of 24 December 1990 and the Muslim Religious Educators Act No. 1920/1991, issued by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. In response to the state appointing muftis, the Turkish community in Western Thrace elected its own muftis.

However, the Turkish community's right to elect its own religious leaders continues to be usurped by the Greek state. Today, there is a dual structure in Western Thrace, with muftis appointed by the state and muftis elected by the Turkish community of Western Thrace. This is because the state, arguing that muftis have judicial powers derived from traditional law, is actually appointing muftis in order to establish state control over the office of the mufti and increase its control over the community.

A parallel is often drawn between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Türkiye and the muftis in Western Thrace. However, in Türkiye, the Patriarch is elected by the Holy Synod, and the state does not interfere in the election process. In our country, however, muftis are appointed directly by the state.

Law No. 4115/2013 envisages the appointment of 240 Islamic religious officials to teach Islam to children belonging to the Turkish community under the auspices of (appointed) muftis by the government in Greek-language primary and secondary schools and mosques in Western Thrace. With the law implemented in public schools, religious officials who are not graduates of higher education and are not competent in their field have been appointed to teach Islam to Turkish children in the Greek language. Despite our community's objections, the law has continued to be implemented since 2013.

Law No. 4511/2018, which amended Article 5 of Law No. 1920/1991 (A11) to render the judicial powers of muftis optional, is presented as an extremely important step towards equality and democratic rights. At this point, we would like to note that the judicial powers of muftis have been used as a pretext to justify their appointment by the state. Although this practice is presented as a positive step, in the past, our community has resorted to national law rather than the mufti for matters relating to civil law.

The religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace has been further undermined by Presidential Decree No. 52/2019, which envisages the restructuring of the three mufti offices in Western Thrace. Following the decree, Law No. 4964/2022 on the modernisation of the Mufti Offices, in addition to the changes introduced by Presidential Decree No. 52/2019, determines the procedure for the election of muftis. This law was adopted without consulting our community and despite all the objections of our community, as was the case with Presidential Decree No. 52/2019.

Although the provisions introduced by Law No. 4964/2022 regarding the organisational structure of the Mufti Offices can be seen as an effort to make the functioning of the Mufti Offices more organised and modern, the administrative functioning of the Mufti Offices is completely placed under the control of the Ministry of Education.

If there is a need to modernise our Mufti Offices, the decision on how to do so should be left to us. Just as the state does not intervene in determining the needs of the Jewish community in the country and meeting those needs in terms of religious organisation, the same should apply to our minority.

The Problem of Political Representation

The Turkish community is not adequately represented at the national and regional levels and in decision-making processes. The electoral system, with its 3% threshold, requires political parties and independent candidates to obtain at least 3% of the vote nationwide.

This makes it almost impossible for members of the Turkish community to be elected to Parliament as independent candidates, and therefore members of the Turkish community in Western Thrace participate in elections from majority parties.

Hatred Against the Turkish Community in Western Thrace

Greece, which recognises the Turkish community in Western Thrace only as a religious minority, rejects and denies its Turkish identity.

Members of the Turkish community and civil society organisations representing the Turkish community are perceived as “the other”, “foreign”, or “outsiders” in the country where they have lived for centuries. As a reflection of this official state policy, Greek MPs belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace and prominent figures of the Turkish community in Western Thrace are subjected to hate speech, and false and defamatory news reports are published about these individuals. Such news reports carry the risk of fostering prejudice, false perceptions and ultimately hostility towards the Turkish community in Western Thrace among the general public.

Hate speech in politics is part of structural and systematic discrimination against the Turkish community. Turkish MPs are being made scapegoats and subjected to unfounded accusations simply because they participate in events organised by institutions and organisations of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the region or because they carry out parliamentary work as part of their responsibility to protect the rights of the Turkish community.

Our demands from Greece are as follows:

1. Greece must restore the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, in accordance with the status and rights recognised by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.
 2. 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 conventions.
 3. Greece must respect the freedom of association of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and execute the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights promptly, fully and without exception.
 4. Greece should restore and encourage the right of the Turkish community to use their mother tongue as the language of education and the autonomy granted to them in education. Greece should permit the establishment of bilingual kindergartens within the minority education system and should permit the Turkish community in Western Thrace to establish special bilingual kindergartens where the languages of instruction will be Turkish and Greek. It should exempt Turkish primary schools from suspending the activities of schools with insufficient number of pupils, as the Turkish community has been granted autonomy in education.
 5. Greece should ensure that the Turkish community can exercise its right to elect its own religious leaders, as other known religions in Greece do, and should recognise the muftis elected by the community as the official religious leaders of the Turkish community in the region.
 6. Greece should not interfere in matters of religion, faith, belief or the organisation of a religious group, should distance itself from any issue that could be considered an internal affair, and should therefore fully respect the religious rights granted to the Turkish community in Western Thrace and freedom of religion or belief in accordance with Law No. 4115/2013 and Presidential Decree No. 52/2019, as well as the Law No. 4964/2022 on the Modernisation of the Mufti Offices, should be repealed. Greece should not interfere in any way without consulting the Turkish community and obtaining its approval, fully respecting the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.
 7. The Turkish community in Western Thrace’s participation in public life and politics should be strengthened, and the 3% electoral threshold for independent candidates and political parties should be abolished.
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8. The competent authorities of our country Greece, should use all legal measures and mechanisms at their disposal to prevent hate speech and racist rhetoric directly targeting the Turkish community in Western Thrace in politics and the media, closely monitoring those who commit hate crimes and imposing criminal sanctions against them.

9. Greece should accede to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.