

Greek Human Rights Violations Against Its Turkish Minority in Western Thrace

By Bruce Fein

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The United States Helsinki Commission, an independent government agency charged with monitoring and securing compliance with international human rights standards, should hold hearings to spotlight Greece's subjugation of its Turkish minority in Western Thrace. While the European Union and the United States have been quick to award Turkey demerits for allegedly slighting Kurdish culture, they have been conspicuously inaudible in the face of Greece's decades long campaign of cultural repression, ethnic and religious discrimination and economic marginalization of its Turkish minority. Double standards breed resentment. The soft diplomacy of the United States will be punctured if it is not scrupulously evenhanded between Muslims, Christians, and other religions in the defense of human rights.

The Commission's chief mission is to police the human rights standards enshrined in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, FINAL ACT, HELSINKI, August 1, 1975. It stipulates, among other things:

"The participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

They will promote and encourage the effective exercise of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural and other rights and freedoms...

The participating States on whose territory national minorities exist will respect the right of persons belonging to such minorities to equality before the law, and will afford them the full opportunity for the actual enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms...."

According to a recent report issued by The Federation of Western Thrace Turks, Greece is flouting its HELSINKI FINAL ACT human rights obligations towards its Turkish minority. Greece restricts use of the words "Turkish" and "minority" in the naming of organizations, thus impairing the cultural identity of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace. Names are core elements of identity. Consider how the names of children or sacred places are carefully chosen.

Greece denies its Turkish minority equal treatment under the law by providing salaries to Greek Christian families with three children, but denying the same to their Greek Muslim counterparts. Between 1955 and 1998, approximately 46,638 Muslims from Thrace and the Dodecanese islands lost their citizenship when they left the country; this was done under Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship Code, which presumed that every Muslim citizen traveler who left the country, regardless of duration, intended to depart Greece

permanently. No such presumption existed for Greek Christians. Though the law was repealed in 1998, 7 years later, in 2005, 30 citizens remained classified as stateless and the ombudsman for human rights noted that delay in processing applications for recovering citizenship was "excessive and unjustified." Equal treatment is additionally violated by Greece's discriminatory policy of appointing Muftis as opposed to permitting their popular election by the Turkish minority. In contrast, Jews are permitted to elect Rabbis and Greeks are permitted to elect metropolitans to the Greek Church. Finally, Greece intentionally fragments the voting of its Turkish minority in local election regions to prevent the election of a Muslim mayor or governor; and, a 3% election hurdle has been erected for independent Turkish minority candidates to force them to join Greek political parties if they wish to meaningfully participate in politics.

Education, like naming, is a central component of preserving the identities and cultures of national minorities. The Lausanne Treaty of 1923 endows the Turkish minority in Western Thrace with the right to establish and to administer their schools. Teachers in schools for the Turkish minority, however, are unable to speak Turkish; and, the Turkish minority lacks control over the selection of staff or the curriculum. School resources for Greece's Turkish minorities are shortchanged, which has forced Turkish children to seek education in Greek schools because of the superior quality of education. Greece's crippling of the Turkish minority's ability to operate first-class schools in Western Thrace violates its FINAL ACT obligation to promote and encourage their exercise of social or cultural rights.

Ditto for Greece's undermining of Turkish minority foundations, which routinely establish schools, pay the salaries of teachers and religious functionaries, and otherwise support the Turkish minority culture. Foundation executives are appointed by the Greek government and are accused of chronically alienating and plundering the property of the foundations they oversee. The Turkish minority is not permitted to elect even the foundation's officers who hold the purse strings.

Greece deserves harsh condemnation for its egregious mistreatment of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace. At this particular time in history, the Islamic world deserves proof that western democracies do not look with indifference at Christian wrongs inflicted on Muslims—that there is no inescapable battle of civilizations.

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