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SESSION III: Challenges of combatting anti-Semitism and intolerance and discrimination against Christians, Muslims and members of other religions

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Juridical investigations against religious leaders of the Turkish community in Western Thrace

Dear Moderator,
Distinguished representatives,
And esteemed NGO Delegates,

Negative portrayals of Muslims, stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims create a general climate of mistrust, fear and hostility towards Muslim communities in Europe. Inadequate representation of minority groups in decision making system ensues impediments to the full enjoyment of many civic, cultural, economic, political and social rights, full and effective participation in public and political life.

Greece only recognizes a “Muslim minority in Thrace” and denies the existence of an ethnic Turkish minority in Western Thrace. The legal status of the Muslim minority is based on the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 and the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has been in practice until the Greek military junta regime in 1967. The educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has been undermined and diminished by governmental practices over years through legislations without prior consultation or opinion sharing with the representatives of the Turkish Minority.

Due to the lack of implementation of commitments related to freedom of religion or belief undertaken by Greek authorities, the right of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to elect its own religious leaders is not recognized. After problems in 1985, the minority elected its own muftis in 1990. However, public authorities did not recognise the muftis who were elected by members of the Muslim community, the muftis (elected) were prosecuted and sentenced to prison for the illegal use of religious symbols. Mr. Mehmet Emin Aga, the elected Mufti in Xanthi in that period was adjudicated in several times and sent to prison. In January 1995, Mr. Aga was sentenced by the Court of Appeal in Larisa up to ten months of a charge on the ground of “usurping the title of Mufti”, and then sent to the Larisa Prison. Through the subsequent trials on similar charges, Mr. Aga was sentenced to an eight- year of imprisonment. In 1996 Mr. İbrahim Şerif, the elected Mufti

in Komotini, stood up in a trial in Thessaloniki “for false pretence of authority”, and was sentenced to a six- month imprisonment, though he was released after appeal.

Furthermored in recent years, juridical investigations against religious leaders of the Turkish community have revealed there is an environment of political intimidation and pressure against the community. İbrahim Şerif, Elected Mufti in Komotini, gave his testimony for six times with the charge of usurpation of the mufti authorities since the beginning of 2017.

İbrahim Şerif, elected Mufti of Komotini, elected by the Western Thrace Turks living in Greece, bore testimony at the police department upon the order by the prosecution office on 31 May 2017. Mufti Şerif, who went to the Police Department of Komotini with his advocate within the scope of investigation regarding the circumcision ceremony held in 2016 in Alankuyu neighborhood in the Province of Komotini for the boys belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, presented his defense statement against the accusation of “usurpation of mufti authorities and office”. Mufti Şerif in his explanation he provided to the newspaper informed the circumcision of boys is a significant issue in Islam religion, adding with this circumcision ceremony they had tried to a certain extent to help poor residents of Alankuyu neighborhood living through tough times with the economic crisis experienced in Greece-wide, and the incident is consisted of these. Previously, İbrahim Şerif made his second deposition to the police on 23 January 2017 for his speech at the opening ceremony of the new headquarters of the FEP Party in January 2016, at which he chanted the slogan and carried the campaign flag the FEP Party used during the EP elections in 2014 to attract attention to the problems of the Turkish community in the region¹.

Ahmet Mete, elected Mufti of Xanthi was asked to make a deposition on 24 January 2017 for his speech about the Law 4115/2013, known as “240 Imams Law” which regulates how the 240 Imams/religious instructors of Islam would be appointed to public schools and mosques in Western Thrace. The relevant law met strong reaction by minority members because the law prepared with no consultation with the minority clearly violated minority’s religious autonomy guaranteed by the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty².

Furthermore, Ahmet Mete will be tried for his actions of the funeral of a young minority member who died while performing his military service in the Greek army. During the memorial ceremony on 14 July 2016, the appointed Mufti of Xanthi, who is not recognized by the community, wanted to make the prayer at the funeral where minority members voiced their strong objection. After the public prosecutor’s office in Xanthi had filed a suit against the elected Mufti of Xanthi and the Imam of Glafki (Gökçepınar), Ahmet Mete will be tried for allegedly usurpation of the Mufti office and for allegedly being the instigator for disruption of the public order and the removal of the appointed Mufti from the funeral .

We ask from the Government of Greece to end discrimination and eliminate prejudices against the Turkish community at all levels of government and law enforcement departments. We ask the Greek government to end the strategy of intimidation and deterrence against members of the minority in full respect for the right to freedom of expression and opinion and treat members of the Turkish minority as equal citizens of the country.

¹ <http://www.birlikgazetesi.net/haberler/12395-mueftue-brahm-erf-avrupa-avrupa-duy-sesmez-bayraini-elne-aldi-dye-poise-fade-verd.html>

² <http://www.gundemgazetesi.com/haber/detay/2585>