

Oral Statement by the P.R. of Greece Ambassador Verros
on the Report of the Independent expert on Minority issues
following her visit to Greece

Mr. President, Madame High Commissioner,

1. On behalf of the Greek Government I would like to thank the **Independent Expert on minority issues** for her **visit to Greece** which opened the way to a frank and constructive dialogue on a number of issues concerning the implementation of human rights standards towards minorities.

I take the opportunity to submit a few comments on the Report at hand.

2. Greece fully subscribes to the basic principle that the protection of minorities and the rights and freedoms of persons belonging to them forms an integral part of the international protection of human rights. We firmly believe that the treatment of persons belonging to minorities should be based on international human rights and minority treaties and not on mere policy choices linked to inter-state relations.

The protection of the **Muslim minority** of Thrace is mainly based on the 1923 Lausanne Treaty which contains minority provisions applicable to the Greek minority in Turkey and to the Muslim minority in Thrace respectively.

Greece, of course, fully respects the right of every person to **self-identify**. However, such self-identification should be neither **arbitrary** nor **at the expense of the right of self-identification of other groups**. The existence of objective criteria as well as the historical and other special

circumstances of each case are also taken into consideration when determining the existence of such groups.

It is a fact that the Muslim minority in Thrace consists of **three distinct groups**, those of Turkish, Pomak or Roma origin. Each group has its own distinct spoken language and cultural traditions which are fully respected. Thus, any attempt to identify the entire Muslim community in Thrace as Turkish is **unacceptable** not only for political reasons, but also because it does not objectively reflect the actual composition of the whole minority. Likewise, any effort by members of the **Turkish-origin component** of the minority to impose their own cultural characteristics and traditions on **Pomaks** and **Roma** is against the modern human rights standards in the field of minority protection.

In Thrace, a large number of minority associations and NGOs have already been registered by the competent courts and operate unimpeded. As to the three judgments of the European Court of Human Rights rendered on an equal number of **associations, they are now pending** before the competent Greek courts. **The government is considering ways and means to implement the above judgments.**

Mr. President,

The Muftis in Thrace are **appointed** in a transparent way with the participation of prominent Muslim personalities. This procedure is necessary since Muftis enjoy judicial authority in matters of family and inheritance law. While Muftis in Greece were always appointed this way, in the past few years certain individuals within the minority have organized “elections”, in violation of the relevant law, and with the participation of only a part of the minority and excluding women in defiance of modern human rights standards.

Concerning the application of the **Sharia law**, Greece takes seriously into account the need to strengthen the substantive review and control by domestic Courts of the conformity of Muftis' decisions with the Greek Constitution and international human rights treaties. Bearing in mind emerging trends within the biggest part of the minority on religious, social and legal matters, Greece will study possible readjustments with regard to the application of the Sharia Law in Thrace.

In implementing the letter and spirit of the Lausanne Treaty, Greece has adopted a number of important **positive measures** in favour of the Muslim minority, such as the two quotas (0,5%) to facilitate the admission of minority members to Universities and to the public sector, according to modern standards in the field of minority protection,

Greece fosters the proper functioning of the existing **minority schools** in Thrace. The minority is now, more than ever, determined to bring their children to the public educational system. The Special Pedagogic Academy of Thessaloniki is to be converted into a postgraduate Higher Education Training Centre for Intercultural Education, thus contributing to better training of the teaching staff in the minority schools.

Mr. President,

3. On another footing, Greece **does not recognise that a distinct ethnic or linguistic minority exists in Greece by the name "Macedonian"**, since the name Macedonian is used in the cultural/regional sense by Greek Macedonians living in the region. Thus, the use of the term "Macedonian" to denote such an identity in Greece, not only fails to respect the **Hellenic cultural heritage and the identity of the 2,5 million Greek Macedonians** living there, but also threatens to create a serious confusion or even a potential clash over identities in the whole region.

Of course, Greece fully respects the **individual rights** of those claiming to belong to a "Macedonian ethnic minority", including their freedom of association. The non-registration by the Courts of one association using the name "Macedonia" is now pending before the Greek justice. However, the use of the name "Macedonian", without a qualifier which would denote that its founders are Slav oriented, creates confusion with hundreds of other associations formed by Greek Macedonians and using the same term, that is "Macedonian".

Greece believes that references in the report to the name "Macedonian" to denote an ethnic "minority" living in the Greek region of Macedonia or a "language" spoken in this region should have been avoided. These references should not be interpreted as implying a determination that such a minority or language exists in Greece but as claims emanating from the individuals concerned.

Let me add that the political party ("Rainbow"), which claims to represent the so-called "Macedonian minority", obtained in the Greek parliamentary elections of 1996 a very small number of votes which further decreased to 1.139 votes in the 2000 elections.

These citizens are free to manifest their traditions and culture. Festivities and cultural events are regularly held in the region of Florina.

4. In **concluding** Mr. President, and due to lack of sufficient time, please let me inform colleagues that they may find our comments as regards also **the integration of Roma** into the Greek society and other issues, in the **full version of my statement at the back of the room.**

Thank you Mr. President.