

In Echinós, 20 Muslim mothers challenge the law denying their children pre-school education both in Turkish and Greek

Bilingual Turkish-Greek kindergartens are a big issue for the Muslim ethnic Turkish minority

HRWF (24.10.2012) - Twenty mothers of Echinós (Thrace, Xanthi Prefecture) belonging to the Muslim ethnic Turkish minority^[1] are openly challenging Law 3518/2006 introducing compulsory school education from the age of five because the local Greek educational authorities have repeatedly rejected their requests for opening a Greek-Turkish kindergarten in the bilingual primary school operating in the community's premises.

In September of this year, the vice-president of the school council, who happens to be a Greek Orthodox nationalist, alerted the school inspection that the concerned children had not attended a kindergarten before going to the primary school and therefore failed to fulfil one of the access conditions. The law provides for a fine of 60 EUR in case of non-compliance.

'We refuse to lie'

"Our primary schools are bilingual in Thrace, we do not want our kids to lose their language and to be assimilated by another culture. If they start in a Greek-speaking kindergarten, they will want to stay with their classmates in a Greek state primary school and they will lose their language and their culture," the 20 mothers told in one and the same voice Willy Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*. And they added "We do not reject the Greek culture. We consider it is an asset to be educated in two languages but the protection of the mother language is a priority".

The inclusion of a bilingual kindergarten in the 174 existing bilingual primary schools (100 in Rhodope Prefecture, 58 in Xanthi Prefecture and 16 in Evros Prefecture) the buildings of which belong to the minority community is a big issue for the Turkish-speaking community. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (Article 40) provides that members of the Muslim minority have the right to establish, manage and control their own schools, and to use their own language freely. Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child notes that in the States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, a child belonging to such a minority shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to use his or her own language.

A number of families have reluctantly decided to send their children to a Greek-speaking state kindergarten despite the risk of their losing their linguistic and cultural identity. Others are resisting and have refused, notably in the town of Echinós. "We were told by the educational authorities to write in one of the documents to be completed that our children had not been able to go to a kindergarten because they had been sick during the whole school-year or because we did not have the financing means to do so but we refuse to lie."

'I was threatened and dismissed from the position of principal of the school'

The principal, Hasan Kurak, who has been teaching for 33 years, including 15 years in Echinós, told *Human Rights Without Frontiers* "My priority was to guarantee the future of the children, I decided to register them, to give them access to the school and to teach them. I was fired from my position of principal of the school for that and threatened to lose my retirement pension if I persisted." He was replaced by a Turkish-speaking colleague.

Kurak distributed the school material in Turkish to the pupils but the vice-president of the school council forbade him to give them the books in Greek. According to an agreement between Greece and Turkey, Athens provides the books in Greek and Ankara the books in Turkish.

Mothers and teachers remain concerned about the future of the 20 children. They fear they might not be allowed to take exams or to receive a state-certified diploma.

[i] According to the 2001 official census, 362,038 people were then living in Thrace. Official ethnic or religious statistics do not exist.

According to the 2011 Annual Report of the US Department of State on International Religious Freedom, "the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne created an officially recognized 'Muslim minority,' which consists of an estimated 140,000 to 150,000 individuals residing in Thrace."

The Muslim ethnic Turkish minority in Greece is a peaceful law-abiding community which does not have a separatist agenda and does not constitute a threat to the security of the country. The criminality rate in their region is also the lowest in the whole country.

These ethnic Turks have preserved their homogeneity around their culture, their religion and their language. They have acquired Greek citizenship, got Greek IDs and Greek passports, performed military service in the Greek army and a number of them lost their lives in WW II as well as in the Civil War to defend their country but they still identify themselves as Turkish. The peaceful co-existence of these two identities is a fact that cannot be negated or ignored and no serious evidence has ever been shown that it is endangering the security, the public order or the territorial integrity of the country.