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RELIGIOUS ASSIMILATION POLICIES IN GREECE: PRESSURE ON TURKISH MUFTIS AS A CONTINUATION OF MINORITY RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

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This commentary builds on previous research, particularly Greek Policies Towards Turkish Minority Schools Risk Repeating History, and extends the analysis of assimilation by systematically examining both the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 and the foundational Athens Agreement of 1913.[1] Together, these treaties impose binding obligations on Greece regarding religious autonomy and community-based leadership for the Turkish minority. Recent state interventions, contravening both legal instruments, highlight intensified non-compliance and raise urgent questions about the integrity of Greek □□□□□□□ bilateral commitments and minority rights in contemporary Europe.

1. Legal Foundations for Religious Rights

The Lausanne Treaty of 1923 forms the principal legal basis for the protection of religious rights of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace. Articles 37 □□□ specifically guarantee freedom of religion, institutional autonomy, and the right of minorities to manage their own religious affairs, including the election of religious leaders (muftis). These provisions were established to safeguard religious and communal life as part of a broader model of minority protection in the region.

The Athens Agreement of 1913 between Greece and the Ottoman Empire stands as an additional, foundational legal framework for the religious autonomy of the Turkish minority. Article 11 of this agreement unequivocally secures the right of Muslim communities in Greece to freely elect their religious leaders, supervise religious foundations, and administer their own religious education. Turkish academic and policy commentary underlines that these rights, later reaffirmed by the Lausanne Treaty, cannot be retroactively limited or replaced. Greek government practices that disregard the Athens Agreement thus represent a dual violation □□□□□□□□□□□ both bilateral and multilateral legal commitments. The cumulative effect of the Athens and Lausanne agreements imposes a binding, historical obligation to honor religious self-governance for the Turkish minority in Western Thrace.[2]

This legal framework preserves the continuity of religious identity, an issue already

highlighted as central in the context of educational rights in the preceding AVİM Analysis. Despite these clear treaty obligations, Greece often circumvents or selectively interprets these protections, favoring state appointments over community choice and thus undermining the religious autonomy securely envisioned at Lausanne. Such interventions contradict not only the letter but also the spirit of international minority protection standards.[3]

2. State Intervention and Pressure on Muftis

In recent years, Greek state intervention in the religious leadership of the Turkish minority has intensified, revealing a systematic approach to undermining the autonomy preserved by the Lausanne Treaty. Since the 1991 legislative reforms, Athens has unilaterally shifted from community-based election of muftis to a top-down system in which the state appoints religious leaders, disregarding both the historic practice and the explicit wishes of the local Turkish population. This policy, criticized in international reports and legal scholarship, directly contradicts the spirit and letter of Articles 37 □□□ of the Lausanne Treaty, which safeguard minority religious self-governance.[4]

Recent developments, particularly in 2025, further exemplify this trend. Minority associations, such as the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe, continue to report intensified official pressure, including the non-recognition and criminal prosecution of community-elected muftis.

European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decisions have repeatedly found such practices in violation of freedom of religion and association, yet Greece has persisted in maintaining its appointment policy.[5] News coverage in 2025 highlights ongoing tensions, with community leaders denouncing attempts to silence religious representatives and restrict the communitys capacity for collective worship and decision-making.[6]

These developments confirm that religious intervention is not merely an extension of assimilationist education policies □□□□□□□□□□ documented in AVİM Analysis, but a targeted and standalone strategy aimed at reshaping the communal and spiritual foundation of the Turkish minority.

3. Religious Autonomy as a Separate Target

Greek policies targeting religious autonomy in Western Thrace are widely recognized as part of a deliberate, multifaceted assimilation strategy. Academic and international reports, along with minority community contributions to rights bodies, have argued that Greeces approach to the mufti institution is a distinct policy and not a mere extension of education restrictions. Greece has systematically eliminated the autonomy of mufti offices □□□□ community institutions □□□□□□□ them into public offices under direct state control and denying recognition to elected muftis.[7] International assessments from ABTTF and scholarly commentary emphasize that new laws and administrative practices

since the 1990s, and their escalation in 2025, violate both the letter and spirit of the Lausanne Treaty and other bilateral agreements.[8]

Beyond administration, this intervention involves state-aligned media campaigns and legal obstacles that stigmatize and delegitimize minority religious leadership.[9] The combination of legal, institutional, and social pressures demonstrates that religious assimilation policies are autonomous, sustained, and central to state efforts to control and reshape Turkish minority identity in Greece.[10]

4. Broader Implications for the Turkish Minority

Greek state policies undermining religious autonomy profoundly affect the fabric of Turkish minority life in Western Thrace. These interventions erode communal confidence and sense of belonging, prompting declining participation in public affairs and religious institutions. Recent field reports note a notable increase in emigration, as both young and middle-aged community members lose trust in Greeces willingness to respect minority identity and aspirations.[11]

Systematic delegitimization of elected muftis diminishes community cohesion, weakens local leadership, and deters open religious and civic engagement. Legal experts warn that such marginalization risks turning Western Thrace into an isolated, divided society and contributes to the outflow of skilled youth. International organizations, including Minority Rights Group International and UN Special Rapporteurs, have highlighted the broader risk of regional instability, warning that policies targeting religious rights aggravate tensions in Greek □□□□□□□□ relations and undermine human rights standards across the EU. The isolation and vulnerability created by these policies represent a pressing challenge to both minority protection and broader social peace.[12]

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The evidence demonstrates that Greeces intervention in the religious autonomy of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace constitutes a targeted, persistent policy that violates both the Lausanne Treaty and international minority rights norms. To protect social cohesion and regional stability, Greek authorities must end state-imposed appointments, recognize community-elected muftis, and honor treaty obligations. Genuine dialogue with minority representatives is essential to rebuilding trust and ensuring sustainable peace. To achieve lasting social peace and genuine reconciliation, Greek authorities must fully respect the provisions of both the Lausanne Treaty and the Athens Agreement. This means restoring community-based election of religious leaders, protecting religious foundations, and initiating substantive dialogue anchored in historical and legal obligation. The broader lesson is clear: respecting religious freedom and legal commitments is indispensable for lasting integration and stability in Western Thrace

**Picture: Anadolu Ajansı*

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