

# Press Release

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## Greece: "More and strenuous efforts are needed to protect minority rights" says Commissioner Hammarberg

Strasbourg, 19.02.2009 – "Effective protection of minority rights is a fundamental pillar of pluralist societies. Greece still needs to make more and strenuous efforts to ensure that these rights are fully respected and protected". With these words Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, published today [a report on human rights of minorities in Greece](#), focusing on issues relating to the right to freedom of association, statelessness and application of the Sharia Law.

While commending certain efforts made by the authorities in particular in the field of minority education in Thrace, the Commissioner remains deeply worried about the persistent denial of recognition of minorities other than the tripartite 'Muslim' one in western Thrace. The Commissioner also expresses his serious concerns by the over-restrictive practice of Greek courts that has led to non-registration of certain minority associations. "The authorities should urgently make possible the effective enjoyment by minority members of their right to freedom of association" said Thomas Hammarberg. "A consultative mechanism should also be created to ensure a continuous dialogue at all levels with minority groups, in accordance with the Council of Europe standards."

The Commissioner also urges the authorities to complete promptly their efforts aimed at restoring the Greek nationality of those minority members who were deprived of it unlawfully by virtue of the former nationality code. "Particular care should be provided to those remained in Greece and who have limited financial resources to cover welfare and medical services" said the Commissioner. "As for the denationalised persons who are abroad, the authorities should consider the possibility of providing them, or their descendants, with satisfaction."

Furthermore, Commissioner Hammarberg expresses serious concerns about the application of the Sharia Law concerning family and inheritance matters to Muslim Greek citizens in Thrace, by Muftis appointed by the Greek state. "Given the issues of incompatibility of this practice with European and international human rights standards, it is necessary to overhaul this practice and strengthen the substantive review and control by domestic courts of the Muftis' judicial decisions."

Finally, the Commissioner calls upon the Greek authorities to proceed promptly to the ratification of or accession to certain major Council of Europe treaties, such as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Convention on Nationality and the Fourth Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights.

The report is based on the Commissioner's visit to Greece on 8-10 December 2008. It is available, together with the Greek authorities' comments, on the Commissioner's website.

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