Minority Issues in the Balkans and the EU

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The conference on 'Minority Issues in the Balkans and the EU' organized with the cooperation of the Yildiz Technical University, Department of Political Science and International Relations (Istanbul) and the Foundation for Middle East and Balkan Studies (OBIV-Istanbul) and coordinated by Mehmet Hacisalihoglu, was held on 16 May 2007 in Istanbul. The objective of the conference was to highlight the situation of different ethnic and religious groups living in various Balkan countries, mainly Turkish-Muslim minorities in Bulgaria, Greece and Macedonia which are less discussed in recent political discussions. Additionally, it also observed the minority issues in Albania and Moldova. While the conference covers the issue of the minorities in the Balkans, a one day conference does not allow time to examine the issues such as Muslims in Sandjak region, the Albanians in Macedonia or the Hungarians in Transylvania. In his opening remarks Gencer Özcan, Director of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Yildiz Technical University (Istanbul), gave a concise overview of the Balkan region, emphasizing that it is an unprecedented laboratory in studying the minority issues. He said that the minority issues have a 100 year old history dating back to multi-national and multi-religious structures of the Ottoman and Austria-Hungarian Empires. He also highlighted the socialist era in which Balkan states lived through for five decades, a period still understudied. It followed Güner Öztek, R. Ambassador, Director of the Foundation for Middle East and Balkan Studies (Istanbul), who argued that protecting the rights of the minorities is a prerogative of the state in question in the 21st century. Öztek expressed his concerns by stating that the United Nation's Chapter adopted after the Second World War does not cover the minority rights profoundly. As the minority rights are a special branch of human rights, it has been easily exploited in the history with the aim of manipulation.

The first session was chaired by Aydin Babuna, Bosphorus University (Istanbul), who is specialized on the Bosniaks and former Yugoslavia. The conference started with Hans Georg Majer, University of Munich. In his speech entitled 'Minorities in the Balkans: The Ottoman Heritage Revisited' he discussed the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of the Ottoman Empire which provides the corner stone in studying the minority issues in the Balkans. Majer began his presentation by raising the issue of different ethnic groups living alongside the Turks in the Ottoman Empire. The most important of these groups were listed as Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Albanians, Kopts, Vlachs, Gypsies, Slavs and Hungarians. He stressed out that the Pax Ottomana provided a relatively peaceful and tolerant environment for these groups in their social and economic life. He continued by analyzing the legal structure of the Ottoman Empire pointing out that only the Muslim groups possessed all rights. Jews, Christians and women had rights at lower degrees. He concluded his remarks by emphasizing the last periods of the Ottoman Empire in which inequality rather than tolerance came to the fore. In conclusion, the unique character of the Ottoman Empire which provided not equality, but tolerance in which non-Muslim groups could live and practice their religion and speak their language in a free environment, became an issue of manipulation in order to weaken the Empire by other states.

Beqir Meta, Director of the Albanian Historical Museum (Tirana), presented the issue of 'Albanian and Greek Policies for the Various Minorities during 20th Century' by overviewing the comparison of the situation of minorities in Albania and Greece. He claimed that the nation states of Albania and Greece were established in different historical periods and followed a different route. While Albania was tolerant towards the ethnic population belonging to three religions, Greece refrained from giving freedom to minorities since it was established as a unitary, homogenous state. He argued that, in the case of Albania, the rights of the minorities advanced significantly after the communist period. Although

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it is not a member of the European Union, Albania signed and applied voluntarily and correctly the European Convention of Human Rights. Paradoxically, Greece, a member of the European Union, has not signed the Convention and does not apply it. It continues to deny the existence of minorities in its territories although some minorities, including the Albanian Orthodox, have preserved their ethnic identity. Consequently, he came to the conclusion that the situation of the minorities in Greece is at a very unsatisfactory level.

Mirjana Najcevska, Director of the Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution (Skopje), entitled her presentation 'Turkish Minority in Macedonia: Between Prejudices of the Past and Minoritisation of the Present' which concentrated on the Turkish minority living in Macedonia. She asserted that the Turkish minority group is economically and socially one of the least developed minorities in Macedonia coming just after Gypsies. Moreover, although compared to the Albanian minority, Turkish population was seen as 'good' and 'loyal', whereas there is a continuing indoctrination in the school system in the country. Macedonians think that the Ottoman Empire occupied Macedonia for centuries, attacked the identity of the Macedonian people and destroyed Macedonia's chances for progress and that Islam is a particularly belligerent religion. For this reason, there have been continuing prejudices towards the Turkish minority in Macedonian society.

Olga Radova, Moldova Academy of Sciences (Chisinau), spoke about 'Minority Rights in Moldova and the Gagauzes'. She tried to analyze multi-ethnic composition in Moldovan society. She started her presentation by giving a short historical review about Moldova and Gagauzes. The basic features of different ethnic groups living in Moldova were constituted in the 19th century. The majority of Moldovan population is composed of 6 ethnic groups; Moldovans, Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauzes, Bulgarians and Jewish. During her discussion she affirmed that in 1994, Gagauz Yeri (Gagaouzie), which is an autonomous administration, was established. In Gagouzie, Gagauzes have self autonomy and rights of education and other activities. However, due to the economic reasons, there has been a continuing emigration to Russia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Canada. She concluded her remarks stating that the existence of Gagauzes will be under threat if the situation goes on like that.

Mehmet Hacisalihoglu, Yildiz Technical University (Istanbul), with his presentation on 'Minorities in the Balkans and the Issue of Toponomy: Bulgarian Case' discussed the process of the Bulgarian policies of changing place names in the country and the comparison of the issue of toponomy with that of other European countries. The point which makes Bulgaria different from other Balkan countries is that the policy of changing place names diversified according to the political developments in the country. The policy of changing place names was justified claiming that Ottoman-Turkish names were imposed in order to assimilate Bulgarians in the Ottoman Empire. The process began with the establishment of a Bulgarian Princedom following the 1877/1878 Ottoman-Russian War. The first comprehensive place name change took place in 1906, the second one in 1934. Subsequently, in the socialist period, along with Turkish or Greek names, also Bulgarian ones with monarchic and religious connotations had been changed. While minorities in many Western European countries could rise their voices about the protection of their names, Balkan minorities, which do not feel that their basic rights are in guarantee, are silent towards the issue. Although there have been advances in the minority rights with the EU perspective in the region, there are still pressures affecting directly the fundamental rights.

Krasimir Kanev, Director of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Sofia), discussed the issue of 'Muslim Minorities and Democratization Process in Bulgaria'. He gave a general outline of statistics of ethnic minorities living in Bulgaria. Later, he made a comparison with the social status of Turks living in different periods. He highlighted that while most Turks lived in the cities in 19th century, today most of them live in villages. Compared to the life in the cities, social status is lower for Turks who live in villages. He underlined that party membership provides an important step in penetrating into the socie-

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ty for the Turkish minority. Kanev concluded his remarks by expressing his concern about the rise of nationalist movements in Bulgaria culminated with the establishment of the ATAKA party in 2005, which displays hostile attitudes towards Turkish minority.

Ali Dayioglu, Near East University (Nicosia), gave his lecture under the title of 'Changing Aspects of Minority Policy in Bulgaria after 1989: The Case of Muslim-Turkish Minority' and paid particular attention to the changed attitude of the Bulgaria towards Turkish minorities. He argued that the minority issue has become a very sensitive issue for Bulgaria after the fall of the Berlin Wall, especially during its quest for becoming a member of the Western institutions and integrating into the Western world. Between the years of 1984-1989, which is called 'Harsh Assimilation Period', Bulgaria imposed various limitations for Turkish minorities and even deported them. Following that period, Bulgaria faced reactions from many countries and international organizations. Due to these pressures, Todor Živkov, the president of the State Council, was toppled and a more moderate period began in which constructive approach was adopted to improve the minority rights. Concrete steps were taken for the minority rights. The names of the minorities were given back. Their right to establish their own schools and education in their native languages were granted under state guarantee. The limitations on their freedom of religion and freedom of press were lifted. They could establish mosques and follow media-publication activities in a free environment.

Elçin Macar, Yildiz Technical University (Istanbul), touched upon the issue titled 'The Turks of the Dodecanese: From Lausanne to Present'. He gave an overview of the situation of the Turks in the Dodecanese especially after 1923. He explained that the Turks of the Dodecanese were neglected in comparison with those of West Thrace Turkish minorities. When the Lausanne Peace Treaty was signed in 1923, the Dodecanese had belonged to Italy and since Dodecanese were given to Greece in 1947, following the Second World War, minorities of the Dodecanese did not benefit from the minority rights brought by the Lausanne Peace Treaty. After 1947, Hellenization policy took over and had a tendency to be systematical. These factors accelerated the emigration process of Turkish minority. A second emigration wave began with the 1974 intervention of Turkey in Cyprus. Macar concluded his presentation outlining the general problems of the Dodecanese Turks today. He affirmed that the Dodecanese Turks have economic problems, limitations on education in Turkish at schools, difficulties in appointment of mufti and imams, problems related to the foundation belongings, mosques, conscripts and so on. As a conclusion, Turkish minorities lack the certain rights which would have been already given under the membership of the European Union in Greece.

Lambros Baltsiotis, Panteion University, Research Centre for Minority Groups (Athens), explained the issue 'Minorities in Greece: State Policies and Administrative Practice' by giving a concise overview of 'the millet heritage' of the Ottoman Empire. He analyzed the process of the Greek society living in the Ottoman Empire and the creation of an ethnically and religiously homogenous state in Greece. He affirmed that religion is a crucial factor for national inclusion and exclusion, which can be understood as the intermingling of nationality and religion in Greek society. So, in order to become a member of the Greek nation, not only did one have to be ethnically Greek, but an Orthodox as well. For that reason, he stressed that a Muslim can not be included into the Greek nation. Later on, he passed into the issue of the decision mechanism related to minority issues in Greece. He stressed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Public Order and the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs are responsible in the policy making process about the minority issues.

Fuat Aksu, Yildiz Technical University (Istanbul), started his remarks under the title of 'A Dispute Easy to Settle: Minority Issues in Turco-Greek Relations'. The presentation of Aksu dealt with the situation of minorities in Turkey and Greece. It was stressed that disputes over the status of minorities do not have a dimension related to sovereignty and irredentism. However, both coun-

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tries have many other disputes in relation to sovereignty rights and status. It is possible to list the problems between these countries as minority problems, Cyprus question, Aegean question and other problems such as competition and limitation regarding the alliance organizations, propaganda implemented through mass media tools and support of terrorist organizations. He supported this thesis by acknowledging that Turkey and Greece solved the issue of minorities with the decision of compulsory exchange of population. That explains why minority issues between Turkey and Greece do not have warlike characteristics, while the same issues which are related to sovereignty and irredentism have been resulted in bloody and continuous wars in the Balkan region. All in all, compared with the disputes over the Aegean Sea or Cyprus, the reaction towards the violation of minority rights between these countries have not transcended the limitations of diplomacy and do not have potential to cause hot conflicts.

All things considered, the issue of minorities is a highly sensitive issue which should be tackled with wise and multi-dimensional policies. It should be handled both by regional and bilateral perspectives. The main objective of this conference was to raise awareness in regard to these issues and provide a humble ground which might lead government authorities to take concrete steps towards the minorities in the region.

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