

GREEK POLICIES TOWARDS TURKISH MINORITY SCHOOLS RISK REPEATING HISTORY

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1. Historical and Legal Context

Greece has been closing the primary schools that belong to the Turkish Minority in Western Thrace for at least the last 25 years, under the pretext of austerity measures in the country and lesser number of students, through temporary suspension, without consultation with the Minority. In this regard, information is available in the footnote below regarding the statements made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye regarding the closure of eight schools on August 12, 2020, twelve schools on August 2, 2021 and four schools on 22 July 2022.[1] It has been reported in the press that Greece has recently decided to close four more schools. Information on this subject will be provided below.

Greece's recent closure of Turkish minority schools in Western Thrace, despite all the statements and warnings made by Türkiye, demands careful evaluation within its broader historical and legal framework. Establishing the historical and legal foundations of the Turkish minoritys educational rights in Western Thrace is essential □□□□ a repetition of facts, but a necessary backdrop to current developments. The Lausanne Treaty, signed in 1923, is a cornerstone for peace in both Greece and Türkiye and for the wider region. Its enduring significance is frequently reaffirmed in legal and academic scholarship, as well as by regional policy analysts[2].

Articles 37 □□□ of the Lausanne Treaty set out robust safeguards for minority populations, with particular emphasis on educational autonomy, protection of religious and linguistic rights, and the obligation for both states to respect the identity and self-governance of their respective minorities. These provisions gave the Turkish minority in Western Thrace the explicit right to manage their own schools and conduct education in their mother tongue—a vital mechanism for preserving language, culture, and communal life[3].

It is important to note that challenges to the integrity of the Lausanne Treaty are not isolated to minority education alone. Recent years have seen broader criticisms, most notably concerning the Montreux Convention and persistent attempts to undermine treaty frameworks with arguments that lack factual basis[4]. Such attacks on foundational legal instruments can, in the words of regional scholars, threaten not only minority rights but also the overall stability and peace established after the World War I[5].

Repeating these foundational facts is a deliberate scholarly method: while unsubstantiated claims may be accepted in public discourse if repeated often enough, history and law demand that the true obligations and protections of the Lausanne Treaty remain visible. The facts about the Treaty, minority rights, and state responsibilities must not become obscured by imaginative or misleading assertions. Thus, this section clearly anchors the following analysis of recent school closures and patterns of non-compliance in the robust legal framework established by Lausanne □□ framework repeatedly cited in both domestic and international forums to defend the rights of Turkish minorities in Western Thrace.

2. Recent Developments: School Closures

In August 2025, the Greek authorities closed additional Turkish minority primary schools in Western Thrace, including those in Kardere and Mehrikos villages (Rodop province) and Hasanlar village (Meric province). These closures were justified by Athens as necessary due to declining student numbers, a rationale frequently cited in recent years by the Greek Ministry of Education. Over the past 20 years, the count of Turkish minority primary schools in the region has plummeted from 210 to 83 □□ loss of more than 60% and a rate that continues to accelerate [6].

Independent reports show the longer-term trend: there were 307 Turkish minority schools in 1926, but that number fell to about 86 by 2025. Between 2011 and 2021, Greek authorities shut down no fewer than 126 Turkish minority schools in Western Thrace.[7] This policy is part of a systematic approach, confirmed by both local and international monitoring organizations, in which school closures have become nearly irreversible □□□□ of the closed institutions have reopened, even when student numbers later met the requirements set by the authorities[8].

These closures have immediate and far-reaching consequences for the Turkish minority. Children who once attended these schools lose access to instruction in their mother tongue and are placed at a disadvantage, both linguistically and culturally. Transporting students to schools in other villages rarely solves the problem and often creates new logistical burdens. Communities report that this fosters marginalization and contributes to changing regional demographics. Deteriorating school facilities in those that remain open further compound the difficulties, with many buildings in states of disrepair and requests for improvements going unanswered by the Greek government.[9]

Official statements from minority community leaders, such as the Friendship Equality

Peace Party (DEB), continue to denounce these practices, describing them as attempts to force assimilation and erode the distinct cultural identity of the regions Turkish population [10]. Reports by academic observers highlight that school closures justified as "temporary" have proved permanent in every instance, and the legal guarantees for minority school autonomy provided by the Lausanne Treaty are not respected in practice [11].

The overall picture □□□□□□□□□□ by media, academic, and international organizations □□□ that these closures reflect a systematic pattern of non-compliance with both local and international legal obligations, resulting in serious impacts on the Turkish minority's education rights, language transmission, and community cohesion.[12]

3. Patterns of Non-Compliance

The persistent closure of Turkish minority schools in Western Thrace underscores a deeper, systematic pattern of non-compliance with international and bilateral obligations □□□□□□□□□□□□ those outlined in the Lausanne Treaty. Over recent decades, academic analyses and policy research point to a steady reduction in protected minority rights, especially concerning education and institutional autonomy.

From the late twentieth century onward, available data and scholarly review reveal that school closures are generally irreversible, with no cases of re-openings even when local Turkish minority populations warranted it. This approach contravenes both the spirit and letter of the Lausanne Treaty, which explicitly guarantees the autonomy of minority schools and the preservation of linguistic and cultural rights[13]. Legal commentaries highlight the absence of consultation with minority representatives in the closure process and note Greeces tendency to invoke administrative reasons, such as low enrollment, rather than engage in genuine dialogue [14].

Comparative research by international rights organizations and academic observers also documents a dramatic historical decline in school numbers. For example, the region lost more than 200 Turkish minority schools since the 1920s, with numbers falling from 307 in 1926 to just 83 by 2025[15]. This pattern of unilateral closures, compounded by deteriorating infrastructure and ineffective policy remedies for displaced children, has led to decreased minority participation in education, eroded community cohesion, and fostered a sense of marginalization[16].

Scholarly opinions highlight that these actions amount to a selective and inconsistent application of treaty provisions. The pattern of closures, lack of dialogue, and absence of remedial measures are broadly characterized as constituting material breaches of Greeces legal commitments under the Lausanne Treaty. These analyses further indicate that such practices perpetuate assimilation and undermine the Turkish minoritys ability to maintain its distinct identity, language, and cultural traditions within the broader Greek polity[17].

In this context, AVİM will soon present a comprehensive analysis of the mounting pressure

and persecution faced by Turkish muftis in Greece, highlighting how official actions against religious leaders further deepen concerns over minority rights and legal non-compliance.

4. Implications and Recommendations

The persistence of discriminatory practices against the Turkish minority in Western Thrace (including the closure of schools and erosion of cultural autonomy) reflects a historical continuity in exclusionary and assimilationist policies. Groups aligned with the Greek national identity, from Pontic and Cypriot Greeks to Anadolu Rumis, have for nearly two centuries pursued strategies ranging from the concept of Enosis (union with Greece) to Hellenization and population engineering that have often amounted to exterminationist policies against non-Greek communities[18]. Such policies have at times achieved short-term objectives, but they have also resulted in lasting instability and cyclical crises in the wider region and their initial successes eventually led to demographic transformation, external intervention, or conflict, undermining the Greek identity they were intended to fortify[19].

Academic analyses compare past initiatives such as the Megali Idea, Enosis, and population exchanges with current measures like the closure of minority schools. These initiatives have been repeatedly critiqued as forms of assimilation that not only reduce diversity but foster division, disenfranchisement, and regional instability[20]. Recent scholarly work and international monitoring reports indicate that the present school closures in Western Thrace have similar potential, risking the deepening of communal fractures and exacerbating tensions between Greece, Türkiye, and the European Union.

Policy research from AVİM and others highlights that recurring attempts to alter regional demographics, restrict minority rights, and undermine treaty commitments reflect broader challenges for peace and stability in the Balkans. The cumulative effect of these policies is the erosion of the Turkish minoritys identity and fundamental rights, diminishing educational opportunities and weakening their capacity for social participation.

A principled and constructive path forward must focus on adhering to the Lausanne Treaty and respecting its provisions for minority protection. Reaffirming educational autonomy, guaranteeing linguistic and cultural rights, and facilitating genuine dialogue with minority representatives remain the most effective measures to safeguard regional stability and mutual trust. As history demonstrates, durable progress will not stem from assimilationist or exclusionary approaches, but from upholding legal agreements and fostering inclusive societies for all communities in Western Thrace. It wouldn't be surprising of Greece's reckless policies backfire and cause her harm and suffering. To avoid such suffering, it is necessary to heed friendly warnings, avoid antagonistic behavior, and think rationally.

**Photograph: Türkiye Today*

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