

2006 OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

**Wednesday 11 October, Working Session 14, 10:00 – 13:00
Tolerance and non-discrimination: National Minorities**

Presentation of the Home of Macedonian Culture

Thank you Mr. Moderator.

Today I would like to talk about the use of traditional place names, the rights of minorities to use their first name and surname in their own language and the current policy of the Greek state to prohibit such names.

As a bit of background information, in the period between World War 1 and World War 2, Greece enacted a number of laws which replaced all non-Greek names of towns, villages, rivers and mountains with Greek names. These traditional toponymes, which still exist in unofficial use among the population are not been given official recognition by the Greek state. This is in violation of Recommendation number 3 of the High Commissioner's Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities.

Also during the inter-war period, during the 1930s the personal names of the Macedonian speaking population were also forcibly changed. Macedonian personal names were replaced with Greek ones. One of those was the Filipov family whose name was changed to Voskopoulos. In April 2005, Pavlos Voskopoulos, a member of this family, made an application to the local Prefect in his home town to change his surname to his traditional Macedonian family name "Filipov". According to Greek law, the Prefect has two options when presented with such an application. He or she may approve or reject the application. In doing so, the Prefect may choose to consult with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In this case the Prefect decided to consult with the Ministry. In March of

this year, the Ministry issued a written opinion on the matter and suggested that the Prefect reject the application based on the following grounds, and I quote:

“The change of the applicant’s surname from a Greek to a “foreign” name should be rejected because to allow such an act might result in confusion as to the nationality of the applicant and thus might result in difficulties in matters and contacts between the applicant and Greek authorities.”

A foreign name? Confusion in nationality? Difficulties in contacts with Greek authorities? I would like to invite the Greek delegation to explain to us all what its Ministry of Internal Affairs means by all of this? Paragraph 32 of the Copenhagen document states that “To belong to a national minority is a matter of a person’s individual choice and no disadvantage may arise from the exercise of such choice”. Therefore the opinion of the Greek Ministry of Internal Affairs seems to be in violation of this paragraph.

Based on the Ministry’s advice the Prefect rejected the application of Mr. Voskopoulos. The matter was appealed to the General Secretary of the Region who upheld the decision. Therefore in rejecting the application of Mr. Voskopoulos to use his family’s traditional name, Greece has demonstrated that it not fulfilling its OSCE commitments in this field. The practice is a violation of Recommendation 1 of the High Commissioner’s Oslo Recommendations and should therefore be cease immediately.

I thank you for your attention.