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*In Response to the Call for  
Submissions: Report to the United  
Nations General Assembly on  
Eliminating Intolerance and  
Discrimination Based on Religion or  
Belief and the Achievement of  
Sustainable Development Goal 16  
(SDG 16)*

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## **Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination of the Macedonian Orthodox Christian Minority in Greece and Bulgaria to Ensure the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16**

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## INTRODUCTION

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) enshrines a fundamental and broad right to religion, without coercion.<sup>1</sup> Yet the Macedonian Orthodox Christian (MOC) minority, along with other minorities, of Greece and Bulgaria has continually been denied this right. This submission draws attention to the systemic and coercive policies of Greece and Bulgaria that impair and contravene the freedom of religion for these minorities. According to their governments, the ethnic Macedonian minority does not exist, thereby nullifying the basis for this minority to practice its religion within their territories. This report strongly contends that the efforts of the Greek and Bulgarian governments in denying the existence of an ethnic Macedonian minority and depriving Macedonians in their territories with the right to associate with a MOC church, undermines the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) in Southeastern Europe. Detailed background concerning the Macedonian minority and other minorities in Greece and Bulgaria is provided herein, followed by a discussion of the issues arising from the suppression of freedom of religion. Lastly and most relevantly to achieving SDG 16, policy recommendations for the elimination of intolerance and discrimination are outlined for implementing initiatives aimed at attaining religious freedom, on an equal footing, for the MOC minority and other minorities in Greece and Bulgaria.

## BACKGROUND

The geographic region of Macedonia, corresponding to the modern territories of the Republic of Macedonia, Northern Greece, Southwestern Bulgaria and parts of Eastern Albania, was historically under the dominion of the Macedonian Orthodox Archbishopric Church of Ohrid for 8 centuries.<sup>2</sup> Due to political and colonial motives, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople abolished the Archbishopric Church of Ohrid in 1767.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Macedonians have been fighting to regain church service in their mother tongue, establish a native-born church hierarchy, and for their very existence against both the Greek and Bulgarian (following the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate Church in 1870) assimilationist propaganda, until the reestablishment of the MOC in 1967.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," *Treaty Series* 999 (Dec. 1966): 178.

<sup>2</sup> Иван Снегаров, *История на Охридската архиепископия-патриаршия. От падането ѝ под турците до нейното унищожение (1294 – 1767 г.)*, (София: Печатница П. Глушковъ, 1932), VI.

<sup>3</sup> Blazhe Ristovski, *Macedonia and the Macedonian People* (Vienna: SIMAG Holding, 1995), 127.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-155.

Despite the non-recognition of the Macedonian minorities in Greece and Bulgaria, the very existence of a minority group does not depend on legislative recognition.<sup>5</sup> It is sufficient for a group to declare themselves a minority. It is important to note here that the only minority that is recognized in Greece is the Muslim religious minority.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, no accurate government census data exists in either country concerning the Macedonian minority.<sup>7</sup> The active exclusion of the Macedonian minority from Greek and Bulgarian structures, institutions and official data becomes troublesome when trying to secure peaceful, just and inclusive minorities under SDG 16, which will be further explored in relation to the limitations on Macedonians' religious freedoms.

## ISSUES

The international community has often forgot the Macedonian minorities of Greece and Bulgaria, as if they are meant to be invisible and unheard. This has stemmed from the ongoing denial that the Macedonian minority exists, especially in Greece. Although both countries deny the existence of a Macedonian minority, there are differences in the way they do this. Whilst Bulgaria suppresses the Macedonian identity, claiming its culture and language as Bulgarian, Greece suppresses all aspects of Macedonian identity, culture and language as a form of assimilation. These discriminatory government policies have their intended effect of profoundly disempowering the Macedonian minority; considered unworthy of being given a voice over their own freedoms of thought and religion. Notwithstanding the existence of international covenants protecting these freedoms, the domestic policies of Greece and Bulgaria have effectively rendered these protections useless with the Macedonian minority still lacking visibility and agency. This is emphasized by the Greek delegation's statement at the 12<sup>th</sup> session of the Working Group on Minorities in 2006:

“References to the so-called “Macedonian” minority in Greece are misleading and do not correspond to existing realities... a small number of persons who live in Northern Greece use... a Slavic oral idiom... does not indicate the existence of national

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<sup>5</sup> The Law Library of Congress, *Greece: Status of Minorities* (Washington DC: The Law Library of Congress, 2012), 3, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/greece-minorities/greece-status-of-minorities.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> The collection of Greek census data on religious, ethnic or linguistic differences was abandoned in 1951. See, Fassmann, et al. *Statistics and Reality: Concepts and Measurements of Migration in Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 237; however, according to non-governmental data there are up to 350,000 ethnic Macedonians in Greece. See, Loring M. Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 45; In comparison, Bulgarian censuses have collected data on ethnic and religious minorities. According to the 2011 Bulgarian census, there were 1,654 ethnic Macedonians living in Bulgaria – a drastic reduction from the 1956 census, where 187,789 people declared themselves as ethnic Macedonians. Bulgaria's 2014 census provided only three options for ethnic group membership – leaving ethnic Macedonians with little choice but to select “*other*”. See, Minority Rights Group International, “Bulgaria: Macedonians,” Published July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/macedonians-2/>.

minority, since the persons using this idiom have never considered themselves as having a distinct ethnic or national identity..."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, Greece's official response to the 2009 European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) report stated that Greece does not have an obligation to recognize a Macedonian minority, nor grant rights to it that are guaranteed by human rights treaties, as a Macedonian minority does not exist.<sup>9</sup> This stance by Greece is in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), as highlighted by the *Sidiropoulos and Others v. Greece*, where a Macedonian cultural and intellectual/artistic association was denied registration on the grounds that its members were promoting the idea that there is a Macedonian minority in Greece.<sup>10</sup> The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) subsequently decided that Greece's ruling was in violation of Article 11 of the ECHR.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, local Greek Orthodox Church (GOC) priests called for demonstrations against VINOZITO,<sup>12</sup> a Florina based political party founded in 1995, whose goal was to represent the ethnic Macedonian Minority of Greece.<sup>13</sup> The party's offices were violated, its members attacked and a bilingual sign in Greek and Macedonian was stolen.<sup>14</sup> According to the party, Greek media has slandered it<sup>15</sup> and its campaigns have been sabotaged.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous minorities, including the Macedonian minority, have been subjected to discrimination in areas including employment, education, housing, health and state allowances and the administration of justice.<sup>17</sup> Racism against minorities is present in public discourse, at times escalating to violence.<sup>18</sup> In particular, Golden Dawn, a neo-

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<sup>8</sup> Permanent Mission of Greece-Geneva, 12<sup>th</sup> Session of the Working Group on Minorities: Statement of the Delegation of the Observer-Government of Greece, August 9 2006, [https://www.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=%2FDocuments%2FIssues%2FMinorities%2FWG%2F12%2FReply\\_from\\_the\\_Greek\\_Government.doc&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1&fbclid=IwAR10-kOoLZ2ntlkyin4ObVCaNR7Ph5NLGNTos1SpZl6pj97ARk2KAMuUI78](https://www.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=%2FDocuments%2FIssues%2FMinorities%2FWG%2F12%2FReply_from_the_Greek_Government.doc&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1&fbclid=IwAR10-kOoLZ2ntlkyin4ObVCaNR7Ph5NLGNTos1SpZl6pj97ARk2KAMuUI78).

<sup>9</sup> European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, *ECRI REPORT ON GREECE (Fourth Monitoring Cycle)* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2009), 62.

<sup>10</sup> The Law Library of Congress, *Greece: Status of Minorities*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Τζίνα Μοσχολιού, "Μακεδονική μειονότητα στην Ελλάδα: Μια ιστορία 30 ετών," ΤΑ ΝΕΑ, December 5, 2018, <https://www.tanea.gr/2018/12/05/politics/makedoniki-meionotita-stin-ellada-mia-istoria-toulaxiston-30-eton/>.

<sup>13</sup> EFA-Rainbow Press Office, "Introduction to the Rainbow Party," accessed May 29, 2020, [http://florina.org/rainbow/about\\_e.asp](http://florina.org/rainbow/about_e.asp).

<sup>14</sup> Μοσχολιού, "Μακεδονική μειονότητα στην Ελλάδα."

<sup>15</sup> Ουράνιο Τόξο, "Ιστορική απόφαση Δικαστηρίου στη Θεσσαλονίκη σχετικά με το ΟΥΡΑΝΙΟ ΤΟΞΟ και τη λάσπη εναντίων μελών του μειονοτικού κόμματος," Nova Zora, May 3, 2010, <http://novazora.gr/arhivi/52>.

<sup>16</sup> Ουράνιο Τόξο, "Τα Ελληνικά Ταχυδρομεία (ΕΛΤΑ) υπονομεύουν την πρόσφατη προεκλογική καμπάνια της ΕΕΣ – ΟΥΡΑΝΙΟ ΤΟΞΟ (Vinozito)," EFA-Rainbow, June 24, 2009, [http://florina.org/news/2009/june24\\_g.asp](http://florina.org/news/2009/june24_g.asp); Ουράνιο Τόξο, "ΤΗΛΕΟΠΤΙΚΟ ΣΑΜΠΟΤΑΖ ΕΝΑΝΤΙΟΝ Ε.Ε.Σ.-ΟΥΡΑΝΙΟΥ ΤΟΞΟΥ," EFA-Rainbow, June 27, 2009, [http://www.florina.org/news/2009/july27\\_g.asp](http://www.florina.org/news/2009/july27_g.asp).

<sup>17</sup> European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, *ECRI REPORT ON GREECE*, 19-27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Nazi party,<sup>19</sup> regularly uses anti-Macedonian rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> For example, in 2018 an alleged Golden Dawn associate/member killed an Albanian citizen because they disagreed on the Macedonian Name Issue.<sup>21</sup> According to the Macedonian Albanian minority, the victim was an ethnic Macedonian.<sup>22</sup> There have also been instances where Golden Dawn members have protested against the participation of artists from the Republic of Macedonia in local ethnic Macedonian festivals.<sup>23</sup>

Following the Greek paradigm, “none of the rights stipulated in the Framework Convention on National Minority Rights have been granted to the Macedonian minority”.<sup>24</sup> The Bulgarian government “denies the existence of the ethnic Macedonian minority, and Pomak minority, – claiming that both groups are in fact ethnic Bulgarians”.<sup>25</sup> Despite its extensive anti-discrimination laws and policies, Bulgaria is continually found in violation of minority rights. For example, the Sofia Court of Appeal refused to register the Macedonian association “OMO Ilinden-Pirin” based on the Bulgarian notion that a Macedonian ethnic minority does not exist.<sup>26</sup> Bulgaria justified its decision by means of Article 11(4) of the Constitution, which prohibits the formation of “political parties on ethnic, racial, or religious lines”; yet this is incompatible with Article 11 of the ECHR.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the ECtHR (2005, 2006) found that Bulgaria had impinged

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<sup>19</sup> “However, Golden Dawn's neo-Nazi profile is clearly visible in the party's symbolism, with its flag resembling a swastika, Nazi salutes and chant of 'Blood and Honour' encapsulating its xenophobic and racist ideology.” Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2015), n.p.

<sup>20</sup> See, “Θέλουν να ιδρύσουν πανεπιστήμιο στην Έδεσσα οι γυφτοσκοπιανοί”, Χρυσή Αυγή, February 26 2013, <http://www.xrisiavgi.com/enimerosi/view/theloun-na-idrusoun-panepisthmio-sthn-edessa-oi-guftoskopianoι>; “Χρυσή Αυγή: Έξω ο ανθέλληνας Νίμιτς που τόλμησε να αποκαλέσει “Μακεδόνες” τους γυφτοσκοπιανούς”, Χρυσή Αυγή, January 30 2018, <http://www.xrisiavgi.com/enimerosi/view/chrush-augh-ejw-o-anthellhnas-nimits-pou-tolmhse-na-apokalesei-makedones-to>; “Οι Έλληνες της Αυστραλίας κυνήγησαν τους γυφτοσκοπιανούς”, Χρυσή Αυγή, January 22 2018, <http://www.xrisiavgi.com/enimerosi/view/oi-ellhnes-ths-australias-kunghsan-tous-guftoskopianous-binteo>.

<sup>21</sup> Αφροδίτη Τζιαντζή, “Ρατσιστική η δολοφονία του Αλβανού στην Λευκίμμη,” *Η Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών*, April 12 2018, [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/174440\\_ratsistiki-i-dolofonia-toy-albanoy-sti-leykimmi](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/174440_ratsistiki-i-dolofonia-toy-albanoy-sti-leykimmi).

<sup>22</sup> “Македонец од Албанија убен во Грција го бранел името,” *Илинден, Весник на Македонското Друштво “Илинден”-Тирана*, accessed May 29 2020, <https://vesnik-ilinden.com/makedonets-od-albanija-ubem-vo-grtsija-go-branel-imeto>.

<sup>23</sup> Καρανασοπούλου Ειρήνη Δ., “Έρχονται νέες προκλήσεις από Σκόπια,” *ΤΑ ΝΕΑ*, July 21 2008, <https://www.tanea.gr/2008/07/21/greece/erxontai-nees-prokliseis-apo-skopia/>.

<sup>24</sup> Committee for the Defence of Human Rights “Tolerantnost” and OMO- “Ilinden”-PIRIN, the Association of Repressed Macedonians, *Annual Report On The Human Rights Situation Of The Macedonian Minority In Bulgaria And The Rights Of Bulgarian Citizens With A Macedonian Consciousness* (2019), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Gay J McDougall, *Report of the independent expert on minority issues, Mission to Bulgaria* (United Nations Human Rights Council, 4 to 11 July 2011), 17, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/720889?ln=en>.

<sup>26</sup> Macedonian Club for Ethnic Tolerance in Bulgaria and Radonov v. Bulgaria, Application no. 67197/13, (ECHR Strasbourg, 28 May 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Hammarberg (Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe), *Report by Thomas Hammarberg Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2010), 12.

on the rights of the Macedonian minority to the freedom of association and assembly and described the dissolution of OMO Ilinden-Pirin as “unjustified”.<sup>28</sup> In 2007, violent incidents targeting OMO Ilinden-Pirin took place in Blagoevgrad where an openly anti-Macedonian mayor blocked the party’s proceedings and ordered the arrest of participants.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, the Bulgarian government maintains that this group does “not face any problems... specific only to them”.<sup>30</sup>

Freedom of religion is not merely an individual right but rather has an important collective dimension. Religious communities typically exist in the form of organized structures, and thus religious freedom is intertwined with the rights safeguarding associative life against unjustified state interference. Viewed in this light, freedom of religion includes the right to manifest one’s religion collectively with others, encompassing the expectation that believers will be allowed to associate freely, without arbitrary state intervention. Greece and Bulgaria are parties to the ICCPR, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ECHR, which impose an obligation on them to respect these very freedoms and rights. However, both states continuously fail to uphold their international obligations when it comes to the treatment of their ethnic and religious minorities. Discriminatory practices against the Macedonian minority and other minorities have stemmed from government legislation and policy, or a lack thereof.

Greece has strong constitutional protections<sup>31</sup> and anti-discrimination laws<sup>32</sup> concerning the freedom of religion. However, these protections, much like Greece’s international obligations, are largely unenforced. The Greek Constitution prescribes the Eastern Orthodox faith as “the prevailing religion”, and formal separation between the Church and the state does not exist.<sup>33</sup> This has led to the GOC adopting a role as a de-facto organ of the Greek government: it receives funding from the state, has a seat in Parliament and its clergymen are considered public servants, placing the GOC in a superior position over other religions.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the extent to which religious minorities, such as MOC followers and others, can freely express themselves is limited due to various biased bureaucratic structures imposed by both the state and the GOC.<sup>35</sup> Proselytism and cremation are illegal, and the GOC and the government must firstly

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Minority Rights Group, *Bulgaria: Macedonians*.

<sup>30</sup> Council of Europe: European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), *ECRI Report on Bulgaria (Fourth Monitoring Cycle)* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2009), 50.

<sup>31</sup> Article 13 guarantees freedom of religion. See, Hellenic Parliament, *The Constitution of Greece* (Athens: Hellenic Parliament, 1974).

<sup>32</sup> Law 3304/2005 protects religious minorities from discrimination. Hellenic Parliament, *Law 3304/2005* (Athens: Hellenic Parliament, 2005), <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/law-no-3304/2005-gg-16/a-27/01/2005>.

<sup>33</sup> As elaborated in Article 3. See, Hellenic Parliament, *The Constitution of Greece* (Athens: Hellenic Parliament, 1974).

<sup>34</sup> United Macedonian Diaspora, *Greece: Religious Freedom Abuses - The Case of the Macedonian Orthodox Christian Minority* (Washington DC: United Macedonian Diaspora, 2013), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

approve the establishment of religious buildings.<sup>36</sup> If approved, they are registered as “legal entities of private law”, and for the religious minority to then own their religious buildings; they must be registered as corporate legal entities or non-profit organizations.<sup>37</sup> Currently, only Muslims and Jews are legal entities of private law. This subordination process places other religious minorities on the periphery in terms of freedom of expression, assembly and association.<sup>38</sup> The result is the erosion of the foundations necessary to achieve a peaceful, just and inclusive society.

Due to the GOC hegemony, the MOC community has been unable to freely express itself and practice freedom of association and assembly, as exemplified by the mistreatment of its religious leader, Father Nikodim Tsarknias. A former priest of the GOC, Tsarknias was expelled in 1992 after having declared his Macedonian identity and speaking Macedonian with his parishioners.<sup>39</sup> According to Tsarknias, he has been under surveillance by the Greek Intelligence Agency, slandered, accused and convicted by Greek Courts on false charges.<sup>40</sup> As per the Greek Helsinki Monitor, some of his convictions are religious freedom violations, which have set a dangerous precedent of religious intolerance in the Balkans.<sup>41</sup> Tsarknias has reportedly been beaten by Greek Border Officers,<sup>42</sup> choked and harassed by hospital staff,<sup>43</sup> and has attracted the attention of organizations such as Amnesty International.<sup>44</sup> Having joined the MOC, Tsarknias built a MOC parish in his native village offering religious services in the Macedonian language.<sup>45</sup> Established in 2002,<sup>46</sup> the parish has been under constant attack by the Greek media<sup>47</sup> and right-wing politicians.<sup>48</sup> Apart from denying the right of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “<<Εκκλησία και ΕΥΠ δυο αχώριστοι φίλοι>> Συνέντευξη με τον πάτερ Νικόδημο Τσαρκνιά,” *Nova Zora*, 02.09.2010, <http://novazora.gr/arhivi/981>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> John Shea, *Macedonia and Greece: The Struggle to Define a new Balkan Nation* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997), 143.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 141

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>45</sup> “<<Εκκλησία και ΕΥΠ δυο αχώριστοι φίλοι>> Συνέντευξη με τον πάτερ Νικόδημο Τσαρκνιά.”

<sup>46</sup> United Macedonian Diaspora, “Archimandrite Nikodim Tsarknias speaks to UMD,” 5:53, 17/03/2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JA98Etu6FH0>, 0:35.

<sup>47</sup> See, “<<Μακεδονική>> Ορθόδοξη Εκκλησία με έδρα την Πέλλα!-Τι ζητούν οι σκοπιανοί μέσω του παπα-Τσαρκνιά,” *ΕΣΤΙΑ*, 11/10/2018; 1, “Σκοπιανή εκκλησία στην Αριδαία θέλει ο Τσαρκνιάς,” *Πρώτο Θέμα*, 09/11/2013, <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/326890/-skopiani-ekklisia-stin-aridaia-thelei-o-tsarknias/>; “ΑΙΣΧΟΣ! ΑΠΙΣΤΕΥΤΑ ΣΚΗΝΙΚΑ ΣΕ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΠΑΝΗΓΥΡΙ,” *Makeleio.gr*, 29/08/2019, <https://www.makeleio.gr/%CE%B5%CE%BE%CF%89%CF%86%CF%85%CE%BB%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%91%CE%99%CE%A3%CE%A7%CE%9F%CE%A3-%CE%91%CE%A0%CE%99%CE%A3%CE%A4%CE%95%CE%A5%CE%A4a-%CE%A3%CE%9A%CE%97%CE%9D%CE%99%CE%9A%CE%91-%CE%A3%CE%95-%CE%95%CE%9B%CE%9B%CE%97%CE%9D%CE%99%CE%9A%CE%9F-%CE%A0/>.

<sup>48</sup> See, “Ήλιος Παναγιώταρος-Βουλευτής Β’ Αθηνών, Ερώτηση προς το Υπουργείο Εσωτερικών: <<Σχετικά με την ανθελληνική δράση του φερόμενου ως ιερέα Νικόδημου Τσαρκνιά>>,” 17/07/2018, <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/c0d5184d-7550-4265-8e0b-078e1bc7375a/10797055.pdf>.; In

religious freedom to the MOC community, the GOC does not baptize children with Macedonian names and “establishes a network of informants to coordinate with state police on any human rights activities”.<sup>49</sup>

Although Bulgaria has no state religion constitutionally or legally declared, Eastern Orthodox Christianity is considered the “traditional religion”.<sup>50</sup> The Bulgarian Constitution guarantees, “the practicing of any religion shall be unrestricted”.<sup>51</sup> Despite this, religious freedoms are continually being violated. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses have been subjected to religious hatred, disruption of worship, vandalism and defamatory publicity in the media.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish vandalism has been displayed on city mosques, although Muslims in the region do not identify as Turkish.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) does not recognize the MOC as a canonical church, but rather views it as schismatic, illegitimate and as being created for political reasons.<sup>54</sup> Bulgaria’s extensive violations of ethnic tolerance and minority rights in the ECHR, including violating the right of Macedonians to assembly by failing to register OMO-Ilinden-Pirin<sup>55</sup>, suggests that registering a MOC would be unattainable there. Discrimination against Macedonians has led to a denial of the Macedonian identity and in turn the violation of human rights.<sup>56</sup> Restricting the assembly of Macedonians in Bulgaria undermines their internationally recognized right to assemble in religious groups or form MOC churches. With religious freedoms being intertwined with the freedoms of association and assembly, the MOC community has become marginalized and unable to express their beliefs collectively with others.

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2019, Vinožito activists sent a letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch requesting church services in the Macedonian language. See, EFA-Rainbow Press Office, “To: His All Holiness, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, Principal Bartholomew” March 6 [http://florina.org/news/2019/march06\\_e.asp](http://florina.org/news/2019/march06_e.asp).

<sup>49</sup> United Macedonian Diaspora, *Greece: Religious Freedom Abuses*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Article 13. See, Bulgarian Parliament, *Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*, (Sofia: Bulgarian Parliament, 1991).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent expert on minority issues*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>54</sup> Русенска Митрополия, “Изявление на Негово Високопреосвещенство Русенския Митрополит Наум,” 19/05/2018, <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=263865>.

<sup>55</sup> European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), *ECRI Report on Bulgaria*, 13

<sup>56</sup> Committee for the Defence of Human Rights “Tolerantnost” and OMO- “Ilinden”-PIRIN, the Association of Repressed Macedonians, *Annual Report On The Human Rights Situation Of The Macedonian Minority In Bulgaria And The Rights Of Bulgarian Citizens With A Macedonian Consciousness* (2019), 6.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Just, peaceful and inclusive societies under SDG 16 cannot be achieved if minorities are repeatedly being denied their rights and religious freedoms. It is therefore important to secure the rights of the Macedonian minority and other minorities in practice in Greece and Bulgaria.

The following recommendations should be considered:

1. In regard to the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief should undertake a fact-finding mission in both Greece and Bulgaria to expose the barriers preventing the MOC minority and other religious minorities from enjoying their rights. Importantly, the mission should concentrate on identifying why such barriers continue to occur despite the fact that Greece and Bulgaria have both been found in violation of human and minority rights by the ECtHR.<sup>57</sup> The UNHRC has also provided Bulgaria with its own recommendations following a report on minority issues in Bulgaria in 2012. This report suggested that Bulgaria fully comply with ECHR rulings and international human rights laws, and “robustly enforce its anti-discrimination and equality laws”.<sup>58</sup> The Special Rapporteur’s mission should therefore analyze why the home countries have not addressed these concerns, and whether certain systemic domestic barriers continue to exist. Ultimately, the mission should give agency to those adversely impacted by discriminatory domestic laws and policies. This will then allow the Special Rapporteur to present a fully informed objective proposal to the High Commissioner of the UNHRC; in the hopes further action will be taken on an international level to prompt effective and real change for minority groups in Greece and Bulgaria.
2. In the area of domestic legislation, the importance of Greece ratifying and enforcing the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) is emphasized, while Bulgaria focuses on enforcement. Greece has already established an independent body, the Ombudsman, which is tasked with implementing and monitoring anti-discrimination laws;<sup>59</sup> therefore, it should consistently utilize it. Regarding Bulgaria, this will require the development and implementation of efficient census data collection methods to reflect true population sizes, along with an ideological shift by the government in its willingness to acknowledge the Macedonian and Pomak minorities. International pressure in this respect will be crucial. Concerning the issue of religious hate

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<sup>57</sup> United Macedonian Diaspora, *UMD Press Release on State Department Human Rights Report*, (Washington DC: United Macedonian Diaspora, 2020).

<sup>58</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent expert on minority issues, 18-19*.

<sup>59</sup> European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, *ECRI REPORT ON GREECE*, 16.

speech, Greece needs to take a more active approach in effectively enforcing its relevant legislation.

3. Greece and Bulgaria be required to issue progress reports on what they have implemented at a domestic level to enshrine international human rights, including freedom of religion, in respect of the minorities living there. These states must take positive measures in accordance with Article 27 of the ICCPR to ensure that minorities have their fundamental human rights respected as recommended by the Human Rights Committee.<sup>60</sup> It is hoped that this will contribute to the ongoing compliance with the recommendations, and that breaches will be taken seriously with sanction or reprimand.

## CONCLUSION

The Macedonian minorities of Greece and Bulgaria experience continual violations of human rights pertaining to identity, language, culture and religion, all of which are designed to be protected at both the domestic and international levels of governance. This report highlights the various violations of suppression and denial experienced by Macedonians and the Macedonian Orthodox Church particularly in the context of freedom of religion, association and assembly. This is also explored in the cases of Greece and Bulgaria contravening the rights of other religious minorities. Freedom of religion is a sacred right protected under international law and thereby any violations should warrant positive action to remedy. It is considered this should take the form of an impartial fact-finding mission to inform evidence-based, relevant proposals to the UNHRC. In this instance, merely more domestic legislation in Greece and Bulgaria is not regarded as adequate to address these violations. Rather, the active enforcement of legitimate measures is required on-the-ground in Greece and Bulgaria, to ensure they meet the objectives of SDG16.

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<sup>60</sup> United Nations Human Rights Committee, *CCPR General Comment No. 23: Article 27 (Rights of Minorities)*, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.5, 6-1.

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