

NEWS REPORT

Date: 29 November 2010
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Title: Equality body recommends increased subsidies for minority schools
Country: Cyprus
Context

Issue at stake: The Equality Body finds unlawful discrimination in the low State subsidies paid to minority schools.
Ground of discrimination: Ethnic origin
Source: Equality Body decision
Field: Education
Legislative provisions: Law on equal treatment (race or ethnic origin) N.59(I)/2004; Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Article 4; the Combating of Racial and other Forms of Discrimination (Commissioner) Law 2004, Article 6.

Content

Case: In October 2005 a complaint was submitted to the Equality Body by the representative of the Maronite¹ community against the Ministry of Education regarding the Ministry's failure to raise the subsidies for school fees of Maronite students attending private schools. The complaint referred to the subsidies that have remained constant since 1996 despite the fact that school fees have more than doubled since. Despite the existence of public schools offering specialised education to members of religious minorities, the majority of the students belonging to minority groups choose to attend private schools which do not offer specialised minority education. In particular, for the school year 2006-7, out of the 359

¹ The Maronite community is one of the three constitutionally recognized minorities in Cyprus, termed in the Constitution as "religious groups". The other two are the Armenian community and the Latin community. The Maronites and the Latins are Christian Catholics, as opposed to the majority population (Greek Cypriots) who are Orthodox. Each of the three communities have their own elected representative who has only an observer status at the House of Representatives, a fact repeatedly criticized by the Advisory Committee for the implementation of the FCNM.

minority students who attended secondary education, only 87 were enrolled at the schools specialising for minorities. The subsidies offered by the State for attending minority schools (termed as 'national schools') amounted to the double of the subsidies offered for attending private 'non-national' schools. The complainant also stated that Maronites and Armenians prefer to send their children to the 'non-national' private schools where the education provided is secular and not 'ethno-religious' as in the 'national' schools', adding that the minorities' students were being offered only one option, that of the 'national schools', whilst the majority children (of Greek Cypriot origin) had a wide choice of public schools they can attend free of charge.

The Ministry of Finance argued that the current subsidy is even unfair to the majority of students who receive no subsidy to attend private schools because they do not belong to a minority and who might also prefer secular to ethno-national education, adding that the position of the state is to promote the enrolment of the minorities' students to the public 'national' schools, because the private schools do not contribute to the preservation of the national identity of the minorities in question more than the public schools. The Ministry added that Greek Cypriot students have less options than the minorities' students, as the former may attend for free only the public schools, while the latter in addition to the public schools they have the option of attending for free their own 'national schools'. By contrast, the Ministry of Education recommended the doubling of the subsidy and also referred to the efforts currently under way in the framework of the holistic educational reform aimed at moving away from the 'ethno-national' model towards the multi-cultural humanistic model of education.

Decision of the Equality Body: The equality body report² highlighted the obligations undertaken by the Republic under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which states in Article 4 that measures adopted to promote full equality shall not be deemed as acts of discrimination. Particular reference was made to the Second Opinion of the Advisory Committee for the implementation of the Convention dated 7 June 2007 which approved of the subsidy given to the minorities to attend private schools "if that is their wish" and encouraged the authorities

² Ref. No. A.K.R. 114/2005, dated 08.11.2010.

to examine carefully the educational needs of the three minorities in consultation with their representatives with a view to finding ways to satisfy them. The report found that whilst Greek Cypriot students have a wide choice of schools to attend, the minorities' students can receive education which is suitable to their national origin and culture only in two private schools, one in Nicosia and one in Limassol; the Armenians in particular have no options as regards secondary education since the Armenian school 'Melkonian' ceased operations in 2005. The report notes that in order to achieve full equality, the legislative framework recognises deviations from the principle of equality and special treatment of the members of the minorities. It added that even though the private secular schools chosen by the minorities' parents do not offer education relevant to the origin and culture of the minorities, they nevertheless offer a school environment which is conducive to the preservation of a minority child's special identity. The report concluded that the refusal to increase the subsidy given that school fees are increasing all the time would essentially mean the eventual elimination of a right recognised to the minorities in 1980, when the subsidy was first granted, which was even before they were recognised as national minorities under the Convention with wide educational rights.

It pointed out that the cost of satisfying this request is relatively low and that the increase of the subsidy is favoured both by the Ministry of Education and by the Advisory Committee for the Implementation of the Framework Convention which encouraged the authorities to satisfy the minorities' educational claims. In view of the above the equality body concluded that the claim of the minorities for increasing the school fees subsidy for the private secular schools should be favourably considered.