

The Limits of Normative Power Europe: The Case of the Western Thrace Turks

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Abstract

This article examines the limits of Normative Power Europe through the case of the Western Thrace Turks. Utilizing qualitative analysis of legal instruments, domestic policies and bilateral dynamics, the study demonstrates how member-state sovereignty, Greek-Turkish geopolitical sensitivities and institutional fragmentation constrain the EU's ability to translate normative commitments on minority protection into effective practice. Key arenas such as identity recognition, religious administration and minority education, reveal persistent structural disadvantages for the community despite the EU's normative framework. The findings suggest that the EU's normative authority is context-dependent and often subordinated to political pragmatism, indicating the need for stronger monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to ensure consistent protection of minority rights within the Union.

1. Introduction

The European Union has long portrayed itself as a transformative international actor whose influence derives not primarily from military capabilities or coercive instruments, but from its ability to diffuse liberal values, human rights norms and minority-protection standards beyond and within its borders. This idea, captured most prominently by the concept of Normative Power Europe, suggests that the EU's distinctiveness stems from its commitment to embedding democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights into the daily practices of governance. Yet despite the EU's sophisticated legal architecture and decades of political integration, the lived realities of minority groups across member states reveal persistent and at times striking gaps between the Union's normative aspirations and its practical performance. Few

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cases illustrate this disjuncture more clearly than that of the Western Thrace Turks, a Muslim-Turkish minority residing within an EU member state and holding EU citizenship, but still facing significant constraints on cultural, religious and educational autonomy.

The Western Thrace issue exposes a paradox at the heart of the EU's self-conception. On one hand, the Union publicly endorses universal human-rights norms and seeks to position itself as a global leader in minority protection. On the other hand, the institutional mechanisms designed to enforce these norms often struggle or fail to influence entrenched domestic policies when sensitive identity questions, historical grievances or sovereignty concerns are involved. As a result, Western Thrace Turks continue to experience restrictions on the recognition of their collective identity, ongoing tensions over religious leadership and administration, and a long-term erosion of minority educational institutions. These conditions persist despite the EU's advanced legal framework and a broader regional context where minority rights are expected to be among the core achievements of the European project. The scholarly and political relevance of this case is therefore profound: it offers a unique lens through which to interrogate the limits of the EU's normative authority not in distant candidate countries or external regions, but inside the Union itself.

This study proceeds from the hypothesis that, notwithstanding the EU's celebrated progress in institutionalizing human-rights norms, the Western Thrace Turks remain among the disadvantaged autochthonous minority communities within the Union. Understanding this position requires an analysis that moves beyond simplistic explanations and instead captures the layered political, legal and transnational dynamics that shape the community's contemporary condition. Domestic minority policy in Greece, characterized by restrictive interpretations of identity and autonomy, forms one critical dimension. At the same time, the geopolitical and symbolic significance of the minority in relations between Greece and Türkiye adds a second layer, as Ankara's cultural, educational and religious engagement in Western Thrace often heightens Athens' sensitivity and narrows the space for reform. A third dimension concerns the EU itself. While the Union has developed dense normative commitments, its capacity to enforce them remains constrained by political bargaining, institutional limitations and respect for member-state prerogatives. Together, these factors create a situation in which an autochthonous minority population formally located at the heart of the EU's normative sphere nevertheless continues to face structural vulnerabilities more commonly associated with external or pre-accession contexts.

The analytical aim of this paper is to bring these intersecting dynamics into a coherent framework that tests the explanatory power of Normative Power Europe. The Western Thrace case is not selected merely because it is politically sensitive or historically rich, it is selected because it challenges the EU's normative identity in a way few internal issues do. By examining how EU norms are articulated, interpreted and ultimately constrained when confronted with member-state sovereignty and geopolitical complexity, the study contributes to the broader theoretical debate on whether the EU's normative influence operates uniformly across internal contexts or whether its efficacy depends on political convenience and strategic calculation. In doing so, the paper also responds to a growing body of literature questioning the degree to which the EU can uphold its own foundational principles when domestic resistance collides with supranational expectations.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative case-study design based primarily on a review of secondary literature, policy discussions and existing academic analyses concerning minority rights, identity politics and European normative frameworks. Rather than claiming to provide a comprehensive legal or statistical examination of all relevant court decisions, domestic laws or institutional records, the study uses available scholarly sources to identify the main patterns through which the rights claims of the Western Thrace Turks have been discussed over time. Particular attention is given to three broad areas: collective identity, religious authority and minority education. This approach allows the study to develop a contextual and interpretive analysis of the case while avoiding an overly technical legal inquiry. Through this analytical lens, Western Thrace is situated not as an isolated anomaly, but as a revealing case that illustrates the tension between minority-rights discourse and the uneven application of such norms within the broader European context.

Ultimately, the Western Thrace case compels a re-examination of the EU's normative boundaries. If a minority population within the Union, possessing citizenship and theoretically protected by an extensive rights regime, continues to face substantive barriers to cultural and institutional autonomy, then the EU's claim to normative leadership demands closer scrutiny. By interrogating this discrepancy, the study not only highlights the lived consequences of institutional shortcomings but also seeks to identify the conditions under which the EU's normative commitments can be translated into tangible protections. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is not merely to document a set of challenges but to use the Western Thrace Turks as a critical empirical vantage point from which to reassess the credibility, coherence and limitations of Normative Power Europe.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Framework

This section provides the conceptual, legal and historical foundations necessary to situate the analysis of the Western Thrace Turks within broader debates about minority protection and the normative identity of the European Union. By examining the theoretical origins of Normative Power Europe, the evolution of the EU's minority-rights standards and the historical trajectory of the Western Thrace minority, this framework establishes the analytical tools required to interpret the contradictions, limitations and structural dynamics explored in the subsequent chapters. The aim is to present an integrated theoretical and empirical background that clarifies both the normative expectations placed upon the EU and the concrete socio-political environment in which these expectations are tested.

2.1. Normative Power Europe: Conceptual Background

The concept of Normative Power Europe emerged as a response to longstanding debates over the nature of the European Union as an international actor. Rather than emphasizing military capabilities, coercive diplomacy or classical geopolitical behavior, the notion suggests that the EU's defining characteristic lies in its ability to shape what is considered normal in international politics through the diffusion of values such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for minority identities (Manners, 2002, p. 239-241). This approach diverges significantly from traditional realist or liberal-institutionalist explanations of power, which typically focus on material assets, strategic incentives or institutional bargaining. Normative Power Europe instead prioritizes ideational influence: the capacity to set standards, articulate universal principles and encourage their adoption through persuasion, institutional conditionality and the construction of legal norms (Diez, 2005, p. 616).

The evolution of this concept is closely tied to the EU's post-Cold War expansion and its efforts to transform the political systems of neighboring states (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, p. 662). Enlargement, stabilization agreements and external action instruments all provided platforms through which the EU embedded normative expectations into diplomatic relations. At the same time, internal developments such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the increasing jurisprudence of supranational courts strengthened the perception that the EU possessed an advanced and legally anchored rights regime (Lenaerts, 2012, p. 377). The Union cultivated an image of itself as a community bound not merely by economic interests but by a shared commitment to dignity, equality and human rights (Manners, 2008, p. 46). This self-perception has become a cornerstone of its global identity.

Yet the concept's normative ambition also generates conceptual tensions. While the EU aspires to universalism, its ability to enforce norms is constrained by the sovereignty of member states, the uneven political will of institutions and the reality that values may be invoked selectively depending on geopolitical considerations. Normative Power Europe therefore faces an internal contradiction: it claims moral leadership yet lacks coercive capacity and often hesitates to challenge entrenched domestic practices within its own borders. The result is an ongoing debate in scholarly literature regarding whether the EU's normative identity is primarily aspirational rhetoric or whether it translates into consistently applied standards (Hyde-Price, 2006, pp. 196-200). These debates form a crucial theoretical foundation for evaluating the Western Thrace case, where the EU's proclaimed values encounter significant constraints when confronted with a politically sensitive minority embedded within a member state (Sjursen, 2006, pp. 180-186).

2.2. Minority Rights Framework in the European Union

The European Union does not possess a single unified legal regime specifically devoted to minority protection; however, its broader human-rights architecture contains multiple instruments that shape expectations regarding the treatment of minorities. Fundamental rights, non-discrimination norms and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity are embedded in the constitutional order of the Union, most notably through the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the general principles of EU law (Lenaerts, 2012, p. 380). These commitments are complemented by the jurisprudence of European courts and the monitoring activities of specialized agencies, creating a layered but fragmented framework within which minority protection is interpreted and implemented (Arzoz, 2008, p. 488).

Within this framework, the EU conceptualizes minority rights not solely as group-differentiated entitlements but as integral to the broader project of ensuring equality, social inclusion and democratic participation (De Schutter, 2005, p. 47). Nonetheless, the Union's competences in this area remain limited. Member states retain primary authority over cultural policies, education systems and identity-related matters, which means that EU institutions often rely on indirect mechanisms such as political dialogue, peer pressure, infringement procedures or the soft power of normative persuasion rather than direct legislative intervention. As a result, the EU's impact on domestic minority policies varies significantly across contexts and is often contingent upon the alignment of national preferences with supranational expectations (Kymlicka, 2007, p. 125).

Despite these limitations, the EU exercises substantial influence through its discursive authority and the normative benchmarks developed during enlargement processes (Schimmelfennig, 2008, p. 921). These benchmarks helped consolidate the idea that minority rights constitute a core European value, setting expectations for both candidate countries and member states (Kelley, 2004, p. 34). However, the internal application of these standards is markedly uneven. While some states have embraced multicultural frameworks and institutionalized substantial minority protections, others have maintained restrictive policies or contested the very recognition of minority identities (Sasse, 2005, pp. 690-691). This inconsistency raises questions about the EU's ability to act as a credible guardian of minority rights when domestic political sensitivities conflict with supranational norms (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p.13).

For minorities situated in politically charged national contexts, such as the Western Thrace Turks, these structural limitations can have profound consequences (Anagnostou, 2005, p. 342). Yet these limitations should not be understood as the failure of a fully developed EU minority-protection regime, since the principal legal mechanisms relevant to the Western Thrace case lie largely outside the EU framework. In this context, a clear distinction must be drawn between the EU's broader normative discourse on human rights and the more specific minority-protection instruments associated with the Council of Europe and treaty-based arrangements. The European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence, the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), and the minority provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne constitute more direct reference points than EU law itself. This distinction is particularly important because the FCNM is not an EU instrument; moreover, Greece signed the Convention on 22 September 1997 but has not ratified it. Accordingly, the Western Thrace case reveals not simply a gap between EU norms and EU enforcement capacity, but a wider fragmentation of European minority protection, in which EU-level commitments, Council of Europe mechanisms, and bilateral or treaty-based obligations operate unevenly and without a single binding framework capable of producing decisive reform (Tsitselikis, 2012, pp. 58-59).

2.3. Historical and Political Context of the Western Thrace Turks

The Western Thrace Turks constitute a Muslim-Turkish minority whose presence in the region is rooted in centuries of Ottoman history and formally recognized through international agreements (Tsitselikis, 2012, p. 41). Their contemporary legal status, however, is shaped most prominently by the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne, which established a reciprocal minority regime between Greece and Türkiye (Petronoti, 2004, p. 207).

While the treaty acknowledged the religious identity of the Muslim population in Western Thrace, subsequent decades witnessed divergent interpretations regarding the scope of minority rights, especially those related to ethnic identification, educational autonomy and the administration of religious institutions (Kostopoulos, 2009, pp. 112-115). The Greek state's preference for a strictly religious definition of the minority has historically clashed with the community's assertion of a cultural and ethnic identity, creating a persistent source of tension (Anagnostou, 2005, p. 343).

Throughout the twentieth century, socio-political developments in Greece, as well as fluctuating bilateral relations with Türkiye, deeply influenced the lived experiences of the minority (Alexandris, 1997, p. 225). Periods of geopolitical tension tended to coincide with heightened restrictions on minority institutions, including limitations on association names, constraints on religious leadership and the progressive diminishing of Turkish-language educational infrastructure. The result has been a gradual erosion of institutional autonomy and a sense of marginalization among the community. At the same time, shifts in regional dynamics, including European integration and broader transformations in Greek political life, periodically opened spaces for modest reforms, though these have rarely addressed the structural roots of the minority's grievances (Anagnostou & Triandafyllidou, 2007, p. 106).

In recent decades, transnational factors have added new layers of complexity. Türkiye's intensified engagement in diaspora and kin communities has strengthened cultural, religious and educational ties with Western Thrace Turks, fostering a form of pragmatic transnationalism through which the minority navigates its identity and strategic options. This engagement has simultaneously increased domestic sensitivities within Greece, reinforcing state concerns over geopolitical influence and, in turn, constraining the space for reforms related to minority rights. Meanwhile, the European Union's role has remained ambivalent. Although the EU provides a normative framework that theoretically supports minority protection, its reluctance to intervene decisively in disputes involving member-state sovereignty has limited its capacity to shape outcomes in Western Thrace (Öktem, 2014).

Taken together, the historical and political context of the Western Thrace Turks reveals a pattern of constrained autonomy, contested identity and complex transnational entanglements. This context is essential for understanding both the persistence of minority rights challenges in the region and the broader implications for evaluating the EU's capacity to uphold its normative commitments. The Western Thrace case thus serves as a crucial empirical

foundation for assessing the credibility and limitations of Normative Power Europe.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodological approach designed to investigate the complex interplay between European Union normative frameworks, member-state sovereignty and the socio-political dynamics that shape the lived experiences of the Western Thrace Turks. Given the multidimensional nature of the research question, the methodology integrates legal analysis, document analysis, political interpretation and context-sensitive historical inquiry. The purpose of this approach is not only to assess the formal obligations and normative architecture structuring minority rights within the EU, but also to understand how these norms interact with domestic power structures, geopolitical sensitivities and long-term historical trajectories. By combining multiple forms of qualitative evidence, the study aims to produce a comprehensive and analytically rigorous understanding of why the Western Thrace Turks remain one of the most disadvantaged minorities in the EU despite the Union's extensive human-rights commitments. This methodological design ensures depth, contextual richness and theoretical coherence, allowing the case to be evaluated both on its own empirical merits and as a critical lens for assessing the broader credibility of Normative Power Europe.

3.1. Research Design

The research utilizes a single-case qualitative design anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes meaning-making, contextual embeddedness and the examination of social and political processes rather than generalizable statistical inference (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, pp. 12-15). The Western Thrace Turks are selected as a strategic case because their situation offers an unusual combination of legal recognition, European citizenship and persistent vulnerability, making them an ideal site for testing the assumptions and limitations of Normative Power Europe (Gerring, 2007, p. 90). The case-study approach offers several advantages: it enables the detailed tracing of historical sequences, allows for the close examination of institutional practices and provides space to interrogate both the formal structures of minority protection and the informal political dynamics that shape outcomes (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 21).

Methodologically, the research follows a structured yet flexible analytical strategy. First, it reconstructs the legal and normative expectations governing minority rights at the EU level, placing special emphasis on how these norms are operationalized, interpreted and contested (Checkel, 2005, p. 805). Second, it

analyzes the domestic context of Greece, focusing on institutional arrangements related to identity recognition, education, religious administration and political participation. Third, it interprets these findings through the theoretical lens of Normative Power Europe, allowing for the evaluation of whether the EU's normative discourse translates into consistent and effective application within member states. The design seeks to balance theoretical abstraction with empirical grounding, ensuring that the conclusions are both analytically meaningful and contextually anchored (Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 7).

3.2. Data Sources

The study employs a wide array of qualitative data sources in order to build a multifaceted and empirically rich understanding of the Western Thrace case. Primary sources constitute a significant component and include foundational legal documents such as international treaties, constitutional provisions, domestic legislation, court decisions and policy statements. These materials provide insight into the formal rights, obligations and institutional frameworks governing the status of the Western Thrace Turks. The research also incorporates documentary evidence related to educational policies, religious administration and association laws that directly affect the minority's everyday life and institutional autonomy (Bowen, 2009, pp. 38-41).

Secondary sources are utilized extensively to supplement, contextualize and critically interpret the primary materials. These include academic books and journal articles focusing on EU norms, minority protection, identity politics, Greek-Turkish relations and the socio-political evolution of Western Thrace. Reports from international organizations, human-rights monitoring bodies and civil-society institutions provide additional empirical detail, particularly regarding rights practices, political pressures and institutional limitations. Furthermore, statistical and historical data are used to trace long-term developments, especially in relation to demographic shifts, educational access and legal reforms. Together, these diverse sources allow the study to triangulate evidence, reduce interpretive bias and construct a comprehensive empirical narrative (Denzin, 2012, p. 83).

3.3. Limitations

As with any qualitative case study, this research faces several inherent limitations that must be acknowledged to clarify the scope of the findings and the boundaries of their interpretive power. One major limitation concerns the fragmented nature of minority-rights data across European contexts. Because the EU does not maintain a unified or comprehensive monitoring mechanism for minority protection within member states, available information is often

dispersed, inconsistent or reliant on secondary reporting. This can produce gaps in empirical coverage or uneven detail across different policy areas. Additionally, the politically sensitive nature of the Western Thrace issue means that official data and state narratives sometimes reflect strategic considerations rather than neutral descriptions of institutional practice, requiring careful interpretation and cross-verification (Henrard, 2010).

Another limitation arises from the broader methodological challenge of evaluating the EU's normative influence within its own internal structure. The boundaries between EU competences and member-state sovereignty are complex and frequently contested, making it difficult to isolate the precise mechanisms through which the EU could intervene or fail to intervene. This complicates assessments of causality, particularly when domestic political pressures, bilateral tensions and historical path dependencies intersect. Moreover, while the case study offers deep insight into the structural tensions underlying minority protection within the EU, it necessarily restricts the generalizability of findings to contexts with similar political, legal or historical dynamics. Nonetheless, by carefully situating the Western Thrace case within broader theoretical debates, the study mitigates these limitations and provides a robust foundation for understanding the constraints and potential of Normative Power Europe (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

4. Findings and Discussions

The analysis of the Western Thrace Turks reveals a complex and multilayered set of findings that collectively demonstrate the tensions between the European Union's normative aspirations and the actual conditions experienced by minorities within its member states (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p. 13). These findings highlight not only the structural and institutional constraints that limit the EU's ability to enforce its own stated principles, but also the broader sociopolitical dynamics that shape the treatment of minorities in a context marked by historical legacies, national identity narratives and cross-border geopolitical considerations (Tsitselikis, 2012). Taken together, the evidence illustrates a persistent gap between the normative frameworks that guide EU discourse and the realities faced by communities whose rights depend on the interplay between supranational expectations and domestic political will (Henrard, 2010, pp. 447-449). This discrepancy becomes particularly apparent in cases where national sensitivities are deeply entrenched and where minority issues intersect with wider questions of security, loyalty or bilateral relations (Anagnostou, 2005, p. 341).

One of the most fundamental findings concerns the inherent asymmetry between the EU's capacity to articulate norms and its capacity to secure their implementation. The Union has successfully constructed a highly developed normative identity that emphasizes human rights, non-discrimination and respect for cultural diversity. Yet the institutional mechanisms available to enforce these standards within member states remain limited. This restriction is not merely procedural but structural: member-state sovereignty retains primacy in key domains such as education, religious administration and cultural policy, all of which are central to minority rights. As a result, even when EU institutions recognize significant gaps in compliance with minority-protection principles, their practical leverage over domestic authorities is often minimal. The Western Thrace case exemplifies this tension, illustrating how norms may exist at the supranational level without corresponding protections on the ground (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p. 14).

Another major finding relates to the deeply embedded nature of national identity narratives within Greece. The state's longstanding preference for defining the Western Thrace minority strictly through a religious lens has shaped both legal frameworks and administrative practices (Tsitselikis, 2012, p. 58). This approach is rooted in historical interpretations of sovereignty, territorial integrity and national cohesion. Over time, it has produced an institutional environment in which certain forms of cultural and ethnic expression are constrained, particularly when they are perceived as challenging the state's official conception of identity (Kostopoulos, 2009, p. 115). Such dynamics create a context in which minority rights become not only legal questions but symbolic battlegrounds over the meaning of citizenship and belonging. The EU's efforts to promote broader understandings of identity and cultural autonomy thus encounter resistance grounded in the internal logic of the nation-state (Anagnostou, 2005, p. 342).

The findings further indicate that the Western Thrace issue cannot be fully understood without considering the broader geopolitical environment, particularly the role of Türkiye. The minority's ethnic and cultural ties to Türkiye, and Türkiye's active engagement through educational, religious and cultural initiatives, have contributed to a heightened sense of geopolitical sensitivity within Greece. These dynamics, in turn, have reinforced state reluctance to implement reforms that might be interpreted as concessions influenced by external pressure. The result is a cyclical pattern in which bilateral tensions between Greece and Türkiye spill into domestic minority policy, shaping the scope of rights available to the Western Thrace Turks. In this context, EU institutions find themselves constrained not only by sovereignty

rules but also by the diplomatic complexities of intra-European geopolitical disputes (Aydıntaşbaş, 2019, pp. 12-14).

Additionally, the findings underscore the limitations of existing monitoring and accountability mechanisms within the EU. While the Union frequently relies on soft instruments such as political dialogue, recommendations and peer evaluation, these measures lack the binding force necessary to compel member states to modify deeply rooted national policies. Even when international courts or monitoring bodies identify patterns of rights violations or discriminatory practices, compliance mechanisms remain weak, slow or inconsistently applied. The Western Thrace case demonstrates how a minority may continue to face structural disadvantages even in the presence of significant external scrutiny, highlighting the mismatch between normative claims and institutional capacity.

The empirical evidence also reveals that incremental changes within the minority community itself, shaped by generational shifts, socioeconomic mobility and increased exposure to European norms, have produced new aspirations and expectations that intersect with the broader rights framework. Younger members of the community increasingly adopt European civic values, seek greater integration into the socio-economic structures of the EU and articulate minority rights not merely as cultural protections but as components of their status as European citizens. These emerging perspectives illuminate the internal diversity of the minority and complicate simplistic depictions of the community as a uniform collective with static claims (Koenig, 2007, p. 917).

Overall, the findings point to a structural paradox at the heart of the European Union. The Union defines itself as a champion of minority rights and human dignity, yet its internal architecture and political constraints limit its ability to address rights deficits within its own territory. The Western Thrace Turks exemplify this paradox, revealing how normative commitments can be undermined by political calculations, historical tensions and institutional limitations. As the analysis progresses to the subsequent sections, particularly the examination of the relationship between EU norms and Greek minority policies, the convergence of these factors becomes even more apparent, underscoring the need for a deeper interrogation of what Normative Power Europe means in practice rather than in principle (Walker, 2002, p. 337).

4.1. EU Norms vs. Greek Minority Policies

The divergence between the European Union's normative framework on minority protection and the Greek state's policies toward the Western Thrace Turks presents one of the most striking illustrations of how supranational commitments can be rendered ineffective when confronted with deeply rooted

national identity narratives and sovereignty-based limitations (Kymlicka & Pföstel, 2014, p. 24). While the EU publicly upholds a sophisticated set of principles emphasizing human dignity, equality and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, the capacity of these principles to shape domestic policy outcomes in Greece remains severely constrained. This imbalance becomes particularly visible when examining the persistent tensions surrounding identity recognition, religious authority, educational autonomy and political participation in Western Thrace, all of which reveal an entrenched pattern in which Greek national priorities override EU normative expectations (Tziampiris, 2015, p. 90).

At the core of this discrepancy lies the issue of minority identity recognition. The EU's normative discourse rests on the idea that individuals and communities should be able to articulate and express their cultural, ethnic and linguistic identities freely. However, Greek policy has consistently adhered to a strictly religious definition of the minority, identifying the Western Thrace population solely as a "Muslim minority" rather than acknowledging any ethnic Turkish component. This approach is informed by historical sensitivities linked to national cohesion, territorial integrity and the perceived risks of external influence. As a result, the expression of a Turkish ethnic identity is often viewed not as a matter of cultural self-definition but as a challenge to the conceptual foundations of the Greek nation-state. The refusal to recognize ethnic identity has had profound practical implications, contributing to legal constraints on minority associations, the non-recognition of certain cultural institutions and a broader environment in which self-identification can become politically contentious (Hale, 2008, p. 135).

Religious administration constitutes a second major area where Greek policy diverges sharply from EU normative expectations. While the EU upholds principles of religious autonomy and the right of minorities to manage their own internal affairs, Greece maintains significant administrative control over the appointment and functioning of muftis in Western Thrace. The system of state-appointed muftis stands in tension with the minority's traditional practice of electing their own religious leaders. This arrangement reflects long-standing notions of national security and the belief that religious institutions may serve as channels of external political influence. The resulting tensions have created a dual structure in which elected and appointed muftis coexist, leading to legal disputes, community divisions and restrictions on the minority's ability to exercise religious autonomy as envisioned by general EU norms (Bates, 2010, p. 286).

A further divergence is evident in the domain of education, where the contrast between EU normative commitments to cultural and linguistic pluralism and Greek practice is particularly pronounced. The EU frames education as a central mechanism through which minority rights are preserved and cultural diversity is respected. In Western Thrace, however, the minority's educational institutions have experienced prolonged contraction, administrative pressures and regulatory interventions that limit their capacity to operate effectively. The decline in the number of minority schools, the challenge of securing adequate resources for bilingual instruction and the complexities surrounding curriculum design illustrate a structural environment in which educational rights are recognized only in narrow and conditional ways. Greek authorities often justify these measures through demographic shifts, administrative rationalization or broader integration policies, yet the cumulative effect has been a steady erosion of institutional autonomy, contradicting the EU's normative emphasis on promoting minority language education and safeguarding cultural continuity (Frangoudaki & Dragonas, 1997, p. 42).

Political participation and representation further illuminate the gaps between EU norms and Greek policy. As EU citizens, the Western Thrace Turks are theoretically entitled to equal political engagement and full civic inclusion. In practice, however, political participation is shaped by a context in which the minority's activism is often interpreted through a security-oriented lens. Political mobilization that articulates minority-specific demands, particularly those involving identity or institutional autonomy, may be perceived by domestic authorities as potentially destabilizing or as reflecting external agendas. This dynamic restricts the space for legitimate political expression and limits the degree to which the minority can effectively advocate for its rights within democratic institutions. The EU's broader expectations of substantive political inclusion thus collide with a national context in which minority political agency is treated with suspicion rather than encouraged as a normal component of pluralistic democracy (Kassimeris, 2011, pp. 154-155).

The limited influence of the EU in addressing these divergences is rooted in structural constraints inherent to the Union's constitutional architecture. Although the EU has established a dense network of human-rights norms, it lacks direct legislative authority over key areas that define minority protection, such as education, cultural policy and religious administration. Enforcement mechanisms that rely on political pressure, soft law instruments or judicial pathways remain slow, fragmented or insufficiently binding to compel policy change in sensitive contexts. Moreover, the EU's reluctance to intervene decisively in internal disputes involving member-state sovereignty further reduces its capacity to align Greek policies with its own normative

commitments. This institutional inertia is magnified when minority issues intersect with bilateral geopolitical tensions, as in the case of relations between Greece and Türkiye. Under such conditions, the EU often opts for political caution rather than assertive norm enforcement.

The convergence of these factors results in a persistent normative gap that defines the lived experiences of the Western Thrace Turks. Whereas EU principles advocate for a model of minority protection that embraces cultural recognition, institutional autonomy and participatory equality, the Greek state's policies are shaped by national narratives that prioritize homogeneity, security and state-centered interpretations of identity. The EU's inability to bridge this divide exposes the limitations of Normative Power Europe within its own borders. The Western Thrace case thus exemplifies how the Union's normative claims can be undermined not by external resistance but by internal structural and political constraints that prevent the consistent application of its foundational values. As the discussion progresses, this tension will continue to serve as the central analytical thread for evaluating the credibility, coherence and practical reach of EU normative power in member-state contexts (Vermeersch, 2017, p. 186).

4.2. Structural and Systemic Factors Behind EU Inaction

The persistent inability of the European Union to effectively address the rights deficits experienced by the Western Thrace Turks is rooted not in a single institutional shortcoming but in a constellation of structural and systemic constraints that collectively limit the Union's capacity to act. These constraints operate at multiple levels such as legal, political, institutional and geopolitical creating a multilayered environment in which normative commitments are rarely translated into decisive interventions. The Western Thrace case thus exposes a deeper structural reality: the EU's normative ambitions remain contingent upon the political will of member states, the fragmented nature of competences across policy domains and the inherent caution embedded within the Union's institutional culture when confronting sensitive national issues. Understanding these dynamics is essential to explaining why the EU's robust human-rights discourse coexists with an apparent paralysis in the face of ongoing minority-rights disputes within its own territory (Craig & de Búrca, 2020, p. 95).

A central structural factor behind EU inaction lies in the constitutional configuration of competences between the EU and member states. Minority rights, although implicitly embedded in principles such as non-discrimination and cultural diversity, do not fall under an explicit and harmonized EU-level

legislative authority. Instead, the power to regulate education, identity, cultural policy and religious administration remains firmly with national governments. This jurisdictional limitation severely curtails the EU's ability to intervene in Greek policy regarding the Western Thrace minority, regardless of how misaligned those policies may be with broader EU norms. The Union's legal instruments are strongest in areas such as market regulation or competition policy, but when it comes to the political and cultural sensitivities associated with minority recognition, its toolkit consists primarily of soft-law mechanisms and political persuasion. Consequently, the EU can articulate expectations but lacks the institutional leverage to enforce compliance in member states that resist normative alignment (Toggenburg & Grimheden, 2016, p. 161).

Compounding these legal constraints is the political structure of the EU, which is deeply reliant on consensus and intergovernmental cooperation. The Union's major institutions, particularly the European Council and the Council of the European Union, operate on negotiation-based decision-making processes in which member states can effectively block or dilute initiatives that challenge their domestic priorities. In contexts where minority issues intersect with national identity narratives or historical grievances, member states commonly exhibit reluctance to subject these areas to supranational scrutiny. Greece, like many other states facing internal identity disputes, leverages this intergovernmental structure to shield its policies from EU intervention. Even when EU officials express concern or identify discrepancies between member-state practices and EU principles, collective decision-making dynamics make it exceptionally difficult to generate meaningful pressure for reform. The Western Thrace case illustrates how the Union's reliance on unanimity or broad consensus effectively empowers states to define the boundaries of normative enforcement within their own territories (Hix & Høyland, 2011, p. 151).

Another systemic factor behind the EU's limited engagement is the political calculation embedded in its approach to internal conflict management. Minority rights violations within member states pose a unique dilemma for the EU: intervening decisively risks provoking domestic backlash, strengthening Eurosceptic narratives and generating intergovernmental conflict. As a result, the Union often adopts a cautious stance, prioritizing political stability and internal cohesion over assertive norm enforcement. In the case of Western Thrace, this caution is magnified by the geopolitical implications of the Greek-Turkish relationship and the EU's broader strategic considerations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece occupies a critical position within EU security, migration and regional policy frameworks; confronting it aggressively on minority issues could complicate cooperation in these other domains.

Thus, the EU's normative commitments become subordinated to political pragmatism, reinforcing a pattern in which sensitive internal issues receive minimal intervention (Schimmelfennig, 2018, pp. 974-975).

Institutional fragmentation also contributes significantly to the EU's inability to act effectively. The division of responsibilities across multiple agencies, directorates, courts and monitoring bodies often leads to a diffusion of accountability. While some institutions may highlight concerns regarding minority rights, others may prioritize legal constraints, political feasibility or diplomatic considerations. As a result, the Union's actions lack coherence and continuity. The absence of a specialized, binding mechanism for monitoring minority rights within member states exacerbates this fragmentation, leaving advocacy efforts dependent on inconsistent reporting, sporadic political attention and limited judicial pathways. In the Western Thrace context, these fragmented institutional dynamics mean that even when rights violations or inconsistencies with EU principles are identified, the broader system lacks the coordinated capacity to translate these findings into sustained pressure for change (Sajó & Uitz, 2007, p. 122).

A final systemic constraint arises from the sociopolitical dynamics inherent in member-state nationalism and collective identity formation. The EU's normative power is predicated on the assumption that states are willing to internalize supranational principles into their domestic political cultures. However, when those principles collide with deeply embedded national narratives, as in Greece's longstanding approach to minority recognition, internalization becomes selective or superficial. The Western Thrace case underscores how national identity politics can act as a counterforce to supranational norm diffusion. The Greek state's historical emphasis on cultural cohesion and territorial integrity has produced an environment in which external pressure, even when derived from European institutions, is viewed with suspicion or interpreted as interference. In such contexts, the EU's influence is diminished not only by legal limitations but by the political psychology of member-state identities, which resist reforms perceived as externally imposed or culturally destabilizing (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 595).

Together, these structural and systemic factors create a landscape in which EU inaction is not merely an oversight but an expected outcome. The Union's normative framework, while conceptually strong, operates within an institutional architecture that limits enforcement, prioritizes political consensus, disperses responsibility and remains vulnerable to the internal politics of its member states. The Western Thrace Turks, situated at the intersection of legal ambiguity, geopolitical sensitivity and contested national identity, embody

the cumulative impact of these constraints. This case ultimately highlights a broader truth: the effectiveness of Normative Power Europe depends not only on the strength of its principles but on the institutional and political capacity to uphold them, even when doing so challenges the core narratives of its member states (Manners, 2002, p. 246).

4.3. Comparative Evaluation of Western Thrace Turks within the EU Context

A comparative analysis of the Western Thrace Turks within the broader landscape of minority groups across the European Union reveals the exceptional nature of their situation and underscores the extent to which they occupy an anomalous and disproportionately vulnerable position. While the EU contains a significant number of autochthonous minorities with varying degrees of recognition, institutional autonomy and cultural rights, the Western Thrace case stands out for the persistence, depth and multidimensional character of the constraints imposed on the community. This evaluation demonstrates that the disparities experienced by the Western Thrace Turks cannot be attributed merely to differences in national approaches to multiculturalism or administrative governance; rather, they reflect a convergence of restrictive identity politics, geopolitical sensitivities and structural gaps in the EU's protective mechanisms. When compared to other minorities within the Union, the Western Thrace Turks emerge as one of the most disadvantaged groups, both in terms of formal recognition and substantive enjoyment of rights (Pentassuglia, 2004, pp. 67-70).

Unlike many recognized minorities in the EU such as the South Tyroleans in Italy, the Swedish-speaking Finns in Finland or the Catalans in Spain, the Western Thrace Turks do not benefit from a constitutional or legal framework that affirms their ethnic identity or institutional autonomy. In several EU member states, minority recognition includes extensive provisions permitting autonomous educational institutions, public funding for linguistic preservation, the operation of cultural associations without legal obstruction and, in some cases, territorial forms of self-governance. These arrangements, while varying in scope, share a common thread: they embed minority rights within the constitutional fabric of the state, thereby reducing the likelihood of administrative erosion or political manipulation. By contrast, the Greek state's refusal to acknowledge the Western Thrace Turks as an ethnic minority, and its preference for a strictly religious definition, places the community in a structurally disadvantaged position unmatched by most other minority groups in the Union. This denial of ethnic recognition has direct consequences for

the community's ability to maintain cultural institutions, articulate collective identity and engage with the state on equal terms (Malloy, 2013, p. 46).

Education offers another critical dimension for comparative evaluation. Across the EU, minority language education is generally supported by robust institutional frameworks, whether through bilingual schools, public funding for minority-language curricula or legally protected linguistic rights in public administration. In regions such as South Tyrol, Catalonia or Wales, minority-language schooling is not merely tolerated but actively promoted as part of cultural preservation and social integration. In Western Thrace, however, the trajectory has been one of contraction rather than expansion, marked by diminishing numbers of minority schools, administrative barriers to bilingual instruction and limited institutional investment in minority-language continuity. This pattern diverges sharply from EU-wide trends and reflects the absence of a structural commitment to minority education within the Greek state. The result is an educational landscape that increasingly undermines the linguistic and cultural resilience of the minority, widening the gap between the community and other minority groups in Europe whose educational rights enjoy more stable and comprehensive protections (Hogan-Brun & Wolff, 2003, p. 113).

Religious freedom and institutional autonomy further distinguish the Western Thrace Turks from their European counterparts. In several EU contexts, minority religious institutions operate with significant independence, often enjoying protections that prevent state interference in leadership selection or doctrinal affairs. Yet in Western Thrace, the state's longstanding practice of appointing muftis and exerting oversight over religious administration creates a level of state control not typically observed in other EU minority contexts. This structural dependence on state-appointed religious leadership limits the community's capacity to manage its internal affairs and disrupts the continuity of traditional practices. Such patterns contrast sharply with the more permissive and autonomy-oriented approaches found elsewhere in the Union, where minority religious institutions are generally regarded as integral components of cultural diversity rather than potential risks to national cohesion (Tsitselikis, 2012).

Political participation and representation likewise reveal a significant disparity. In many EU countries, minorities benefit from political arrangements designed to ensure equitable representation, whether through reserved parliamentary seats, affirmative participation mechanisms or regional autonomy structures that enhance political agency. By contrast, the political representation of Western Thrace Turks is heavily shaped by informal barriers, societal suspicion

and administrative constraints that discourage minority activism. Although the community participates in national elections and maintains political presence, the freedom to articulate minority-specific concerns is curtailed by a broader climate in which such advocacy is frequently interpreted as geopolitically motivated or externally influenced. This dynamic substantially restricts the community's ability to leverage political institutions to secure rights, placing it at a notable disadvantage compared to other minorities with more institutionalized avenues for participation (Kymlicka, 2007, p. 148).

A broader EU-level comparison reveals an additional layer of disadvantage: the Western Thrace Turks are the rare exception among EU minorities whose rights deficits persist despite being continuously highlighted by international observers. In many EU contexts where minority protections have historically been inconsistent, sustained pressure from supranational institutions has contributed to progressive reforms. However, because the Western Thrace case is embedded within the internal politics of an EU member state whose identity narratives are tightly wound around issues of territorial integrity and national sovereignty, external pressure has proven less effective. The EU's inability or unwillingness to act robustly in this domain has allowed longstanding structural weaknesses to endure, reinforcing the minority's sense of marginalization and weakening the potential for meaningful change. In comparative perspective, this positions the Western Thrace Turks as an extreme outlier, an internally marginalized group within a Union that professes to uphold minority protection as a foundational value (Gilbert, 2017, pp. 79-82).

Ultimately, the comparative evaluation underscores the exceptional nature of the Western Thrace Turks' situation within the EU. While disparities in minority treatment across the Union are not uncommon, the combination of legal non-recognition, educational contraction, constrained religious autonomy, geopolitical entanglement and limited political space renders their case uniquely severe. Most importantly, the structural factors that constrain their rights are not transitional anomalies but deeply entrenched features of domestic policy that persist despite the EU's normative commitments. This makes Western Thrace not simply a case of incomplete norm internalization but a profound indicator of the limits of the EU's normative power. When viewed against the broader European landscape, the Western Thrace Turks emerge not just as a disadvantaged minority but as the group that most clearly exposes the structural boundaries of the EU's human-rights project and the unresolved tension between supranational ideals and state-driven realities (Bieber, 2018, p. 142).

5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study reveals a deep and persistent disjuncture between the European Union's normative commitments and the lived realities of the Western Thrace Turks. From the outset, the research sought to interrogate the limits of Normative Power Europe by examining a minority population situated not at the EU's periphery but firmly within its territorial and legal boundaries. The hypothesis that the Western Thrace Turks constitute one of the most disadvantaged minority groups in the European Union is strongly supported by the findings. Their situation demonstrates that the EU's normative influence, though conceptually ambitious and institutionally proclaimed, is structurally constrained in practice by the sovereignty of member states, political sensitivities and the geopolitical entanglements that shape regional identity politics. The case therefore exposes an internal tension at the heart of the European project: the gap between normative aspiration and state-driven implementation.

The findings illustrate that Greek minority policies, grounded in narrowly defined identity narratives, security-based interpretations of religious authority and restrictive approaches to educational autonomy, stand in clear contrast to the EU's broader normative principles. The Greek state's insistence on defining the minority exclusively in religious terms, its control over religious leadership and its regulatory decisions affecting minority schooling reveal a model of minority governance that diverges substantially from the rights-based framework that the EU claims to uphold. Yet the EU's capacity to address these inconsistencies remains limited. The structural constraints embedded in the EU's distribution of competences, coupled with its reliance on intergovernmental consensus, diminish its ability to intervene in culturally sensitive domestic domains. These systemic limitations are further amplified by Greece's geopolitical posture, its historical relationship with Türkiye and the political prudence that permeates EU institutions when encountering disputes that could jeopardize internal cohesion.

The study contributes to theoretical debates by demonstrating that Normative Power Europe is not uniformly operative across all internal contexts. While the EU may effectively promote norms in external environments or in accession processes where conditionality can be leveraged, its influence weakens considerably when confronting sensitive internal matters where member states retain sovereign authority. The Western Thrace case illustrates that EU normative power is heavily mediated by political convenience, strategic calculation and the internal cultural narratives of member states. In this respect, the findings challenge the assumption that the EU's normative identity is

self-sustaining or universally enforceable. Instead, the case highlights the conditional and context-dependent nature of normative influence, revealing that the EU's capacity to act is shaped not only by legal constraints but by deeper structural forces related to nationalism, identity politics and geopolitical alignment.

Empirically, this research demonstrates the exceptional vulnerability of the Western Thrace Turks in comparison to other recognized minority groups across the EU. Unlike many minorities that benefit from constitutional protections, territorial autonomy or robust cultural rights frameworks, the Western Thrace community navigates a political environment characterized by limited institutional support, contested recognition and persistent restrictions on cultural, educational and religious autonomy. These findings underscore the structural inequities embedded within EU member-state practices and highlight the insufficiency of the EU's monitoring and enforcement mechanisms in safeguarding minority rights. The Western Thrace case is therefore not an isolated anomaly but a powerful indicator of the EU's broader challenges in ensuring that its normative foundations are implemented consistently across all member states.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific circumstances of the Western Thrace Turks. They raise fundamental questions about the credibility and sustainability of the EU's normative project. If a minority population within the Union, protected by EU citizenship and theoretically shielded by extensive human-rights mechanisms, continues to experience systemic disadvantages, then the EU's claim to normative leadership must be critically re-examined. For the EU to strengthen its role as a normative actor, institutional reforms may be necessary, including more coherent monitoring structures, clearer mechanisms for addressing internal rights violations and stronger political commitments to uphold fundamental values even when doing so challenges domestic narratives. Such reforms, while politically difficult, are essential for bridging the gap between normative rhetoric and practical enforcement.

Finally, the study opens avenues for future research that can deepen understanding of the dynamics explored here. Comparative analyses involving other marginalized groups within the EU could reveal whether similar structural patterns constrain the Union's normative influence in different contexts. Likewise, further investigation into the shifting identity dynamics within the Western Thrace minority itself, including generational changes, evolving civic expectations and transnational interactions, would enrich the empirical understanding of how minority communities navigate the complex

space between national policy and supranational norms. These lines of inquiry would help to clarify whether the limitations identified in this study are specific to the Western Thrace context or indicative of broader structural limitations inherent to the EU's normative model.

In conclusion, the Western Thrace case demonstrates that the EU's normative power, while conceptually robust, is institutionally fragile and politically circumscribed. The enduring challenges faced by the Western Thrace Turks expose the boundaries of the EU's ability to protect minority rights within its own borders and compel a reconsideration of the assumptions underlying Normative Power Europe. By illuminating this paradox, the study not only advances academic debates but also underscores the urgent need for renewed political and institutional commitment to ensuring that the EU's foundational principles are meaningfully upheld. The credibility of the European project ultimately depends on its capacity to protect all of its citizens especially those whose rights are most vulnerable and to bridge the divide between what the Union claims to be and what it is able to achieve in practice.

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