

AMHRC/MHRMI Congratulate EFA – Rainbow/Vinozhito On the Opening of Voden Office

15 November 2009

Melbourne, Australia and Toronto, Canada – The **Australian Macedonian Human Rights Committee** and **Macedonian Human Rights Movement International**, congratulate the **European Free Alliance – Rainbow/Vinozhito** - a political party fighting for the human rights of ethnic Macedonians in Greece - on the opening of an office today on the main street of the town of Edessa/Voden in Northern Greece.

The opening ceremony was attended by the leaders of Vinozhito's Voden branch. A bilingual sign (in Greek and Macedonian) with the words "**EFA – Rainbow Voden Committee**" was displayed on the balcony of the office.

The decision to open an office in Edessa/Voden came about as a result of an increasing demand for a central support base from **Vinozhito's** local branch members. There is also a hope within **Vinozhito's Central Council** that this action will induce the Greek government to finally end its denial of the existence of a Macedonian minority in Greece and begin a process of reconciliation.

The Edessa/Voden office is EFA-Rainbow's second office in Northern Greece. The **AMHRC** and **MHRMI** trust that there will not be a repeat of events resembling those around the opening of **Vinozhito's** first office. The first office was opened on 6 September 1995 in the town of Florina/Lerin. During the evening, the office was broken into and ransacked, and the bilingual sign "**Rainbow Party, Florina Committee**" was stolen.

The sign was replaced, however on 12 September 1995, priests from the Florina/Lerin region called on people to join a "*demonstration to protest against the enemies of Greece who arbitrarily display signs with anti-Hellenic inscriptions.*" The statement also called for the "*deportation*" of those responsible. The very next day, the Lerin office was attacked by a number of people, including the mayor of Florina/Lerin.

Upon breaking into the office, these individuals assaulted those inside and confiscated the **Vinozhito** sign. During the course of the night equipment and furniture on the premises were tossed through the window and set alight. Soon after, four members of **Vinozhito** were charged with "*causing and inciting mutual hatred among the citizens*" under Article 192 of the Greek Penal Code. It was only after international pressure that the charges were dropped.

This display of intolerance found closure in 2005, when the European Court of Human Rights found the Greek government to be in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights by restricting party members' freedom of assembly (Article 11) and failing to provide due process within reasonable time (Article 6). The Greek government was ordered to pay €35,000 in compensation to EFA Rainbow. This was a great victory for democratic diversity and **Vinozhito's** multi-lingual sign is steadily becoming an accepted part of life in Lerin/Florina.

For those interested in contributing support towards **Vinozhito's** courageous efforts to defeat ethnocentric bigotry, please contact the **AMHRC** or **MHRMI** per the means offered below.

Established in 1984 the Australian Macedonian Human Rights Committee is a non-governmental organisation that informs and advocates to governments, international institutions and broader communities about combating discrimination and promoting human rights. Our aspiration is to ensure that Macedonian communities and other excluded groups throughout the world are recognised, respected and afforded equitable treatment. For more information please visit www.macedonianhr.org.au, or contact AMHRC via macedonian_rights@hotmail.com or +61 3 93298960.

Macedonian Human Rights Movement International (MHRMI) has been active on human and national rights issues for Macedonians and other oppressed peoples since 1986. For more information, please visit www.mhrmi.org, or contact MHRMI at 416-850-7125, or info@mhrmi.org.