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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**WORLD EPIROTES RAISE ALARM IN U.S.,
EUROPE ON ALBANIAN CENSUS**

The World Council of Epirotes Abroad (WCEA) urges the United States and the European Union to take measures to insure that a census scheduled for next month in Albania, which will count ethnic and religious minorities for the first time in decades, is conducted without hindrance, manipulation, harassment or intimidation.

The intimidation has already begun. Earlier this year the Albanian parliament passed a law stating that a fine of \$1,000, which is several months wages in Albania, will be levied on those who declare an ethnic identity in the census that was not registered on their family records. This law violates both the Albanian Constitution and international law, which states that individuals have a right to declare any ethnic identity to which they feel they belong, and it is unlikely to be enforced for those reasons.

But it was passed nevertheless solely to intimidate minority members who were afraid to declare an ethnic affiliation during the country's long Stalinist rule and are afraid they will be punished if they do so now. Supporters of the law believe that many Albanians are unaware of their constitutional rights and will not declare their ethnic identity in the new census out of fear they will be fined if it does not coincide with old records.

The WCEA is calling Washington and Brussels to have their representatives in Albania to issue statements that the country's citizens may declare their ethnic and religious affiliations without fear of reprisals, including payment of fines called for by the new legislation.

"Albanian authorities and many legislators have consistently tried to downplay the number of ethnic Greeks and other minorities in the country so they can deny them their basic human rights," declared WCEA President Chris Dimou. "The new law aims at perpetuating that policy and Albanians must know that they need not fear it so they can declare their ethnic identities freely in the new census. Only the U.S. and the E.U. have the prestige in Albania to convince its citizens that they can declare their ethnic and religious identities without any fear of any reprisals afterward. And we urge them to give them those assurances as soon as possible."

The WCEA also calls on all international organizations that will oversee the census to take every precaution to insure that Albanians have ample and unhindered opportunity to fill out and submit their census reports and to insure that their declarations are fully and accurately counted. "It is clear from the law recently passed to intimidate Albanians that powerful reactionary forces in the country are bent on subverting an honest count of the nation's ethnic and religious minorities, and plan to use every means available to them to avoid it," said honorary president Nicholas Gage. "They must not be allowed to succeed because the Albanian people have been waiting for 80 years for this chance."

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