

Esteemed Director General of UNESCO, Your Excellency, Mrs. Audrey Azoulay
Esteemed Members of the World Heritage Committee,

Hagia Sophia is one of the greatest surviving examples of Byzantine architecture as well as the epitome of the Byzantine era. It was erected on 537 AD, during the reign of Emperor Justinian, in Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire. The monument has been standing for almost 1500 years and no other Byzantine monument covers such a span of time. Built as a church and a cathedral, Hagia Sophia held the title of the largest cathedral in the world for almost one millennium. The Church was converted to a Roman Catholic Church during the crusades (from 1204-1261 AD). After the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans it was converted to a mosque until 1931. In 1935 Kemal Attaturk, in an act of radical humanism, decided that it would operate as a museum and in his words "this should be a monument for all civilization". In 1985 after the application submitted by the Turkish government the complex along with other monuments was inscribed in the List of World Cultural Heritage as one acquiring Outstanding Universal Value¹. Bearing marks of a troubleshooting relationship of a place where religions met and clashed or tried to conquer one another, Hagia Sophia, with this symbolic gesture was transformed into a representation of interreligious dialogue and a remnant of confluence of religions within the centuries.

Despite being one of the most visited (the most visited museum in Turkey according to the Ministry of Culture in Turkey for 2019) and gathering significant income for the Turkish state², the monument has faced many strains and damages due to lacking preservation. This follows the same fate of Byzantine Constantinople that is vanishing day by day by the lacking enforcement of archaeological laws and the need to make way for modern constructions. Notwithstanding efforts from donors during the 90s and 00s, the monument is still in a critical situation and the latest development will cause further deterioration. Restorations began in 1990 but were disrupted continuously due to the lack of funding. President Erdogan decided to transfer it under the oversight from the Turkish Ministry of Culture to the Presidency of Religious Affairs³, and sign a decree reopening for religious worship, after the decision of the

¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/356> - part of the Historic Areas of Istanbul.

² Current entrance fee is 100 Turkish Lira, the equivalent of almost 13 euros. Almost 3,5 million visitors visit the monument annual.

³ <https://www.diyamet.gov.tr/en-US/>

Council of State which concluded that the Mehmed the II's original deed that converted into a mosque was in effect over all subsequent decisions for its use.

It remains unclear what this conversion might cause to the monument, whether it would be used only for occasional events or regular prayers and how it will be altered or modified to fit the purpose. Parts of the monument signifying other religious presence will be covered, yet it is unclear how modifications will occur to serve its new purpose. According to archaeologists there are many parts of it, that remain undiscovered and uncharted, which would offer us better understanding of all those eras the monument has survived by. This decision will make it impossible, once and for all, for any efforts to decode the secrets of Hagia Sophia.

The monument was built in honor of the holy wisdom, the *Λόγος* of God and holy presence on earth representing reason and logic. It is indicative of the greatness of the symbolic value of the monument to note, that after the conquest in 1453 the name was not altered but was merely adapted to the Turkish spelling (Ayasofya).

This decision apart from being unreasonable, as going against the embodiment of the symbolism, is an atrocity and a clear violation of international obligations that Turkey bears as a state party to the World Heritage Convention⁴ which it ratified on the 16th March 1983; it bears clear political significance. The monument retains power as a symbol of Turkish nationalism and radicalism, it signifies the end of secularism and might incite hatred against religious and ethnic minorities in Turkey. This action was criticized by Vice-Presidents of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas⁵ and High Representative for External Relations, Mr. Josep Borrell⁶.

Therefore, we would like to ask you:

⁴ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/tr>

⁵ https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-reconverts-hagia-sophia-from-museum-to-mosque/?utm_source=RSS_Feed&utm_medium=RSS&utm_campaign=RSS_Syndication

⁶ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/82728/Turkey:%20Statement%20by%20the%20High%20Representative/Vice-President%20Josep%20Borrell%20on%20the%20decision%20regarding%20Hagia%20Sophia

- The World Heritage Committee to register the monument as "in danger" according to article 11 (4) of the World Heritage Convention,
- The Executive Board to add the topic on the agenda of the next General Conference with the purpose to discuss and assess the ongoing situation.

Members of the European Parliament:

Alexis Georgoulis (GUE/NGL)

Salvatore De Meo (EPP)

Martina Michels (GUE/NGL)

Ivan Štefanec (EPP)

Katalin Cseh (Renew Europe)

Nicolae Stefanuta (Renew Europe)

Irena Joveva (Renew Europe)

Maria Spyraiki (EPP)

Evangelos Meimarakis (EPP)

Dimitrios Papadimoulis (GUE/NGL)

Stelios Kympouropoulos (EPP)

Anna-Misel Asimakopoulou (EPP)

Giorgos Georgiou (GUE/NGL)

Demetris Papadakis (S&D)

Francois Alfonsi (Greens/EFA)

Elissavet Vozemberg (EPP)

Bronis Ropé (Greens/EFA)

Dace Melbārde (ECR)

Fabio Massimo Castaldo (NI)