



Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union

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Brussels, 17 July 2020

COMMUNIQUE ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF HAGIA SOFIA FROM A MUSEUM TO A MOSQUE

It is with deep grief that the members of CROCEU¹ learned about the unprecedented violation of the UNESCO rules that took place in Turkey, after the Turkish authorities decided to change the status of the world heritage monument “Hagia Sophia” in Istanbul, from a museum into a mosque.

The issue has attracted global attention and many - on both sides of the Atlantic - have invited the President of the Turkish Republic, Mr. Recep Tayip Erdogan, to rethink this provocative action that violates historical memory and religious pluralism, putting a thorn in the side of millions of Christians all across the globe. The European Parliament has objected to such a development before. In March 2019 MEPs invited the Turkish government to fully respect and fulfill its legal obligations to protect cultural heritage.

Hagia Sophia has played a decisive role in the shaping of the Christian liturgical tradition. It has served as a Cathedral from 537 until 1453, for almost a thousand years. Hagia Sophia is a masterpiece of architectural genius, globally renowned as one of the preeminent monuments of Christian civilization worldwide. Hagia Sophia, throughout the centuries and even in our days, has been a global source of immense inspiration as a spiritual, artistic and architectural miracle. That proves the justification of the decision by UNESCO, in 1985, to include it into its world heritage list, as an architectural masterpiece that has withstood destruction, both natural and human.

We strongly believe - and unfortunately we fear that it may turn out to be the case - that the status change of Hagia Sophia will provoke reactions, frustration and disappointment not only from millions of Christians around the globe, no matter their denomination, but also from all those millions of people who go to visit this marvel of architecture and historical monument that has been standing in its place for almost 1500

¹ Established in 2010, the *Committee of the Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Institutions* (CROCEU) brings together the representatives in Brussels of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Patriarchate of Moscow, the Patriarchate of Romania, the Patriarchate of Bulgaria, the Church of Cyprus and the Church of Greece. Its main goal is to articulate with a common voice the concerns and the perspectives of the Orthodox Church on EU-related matters.

years since its construction and has been a legacy for humanity at large.

In a time of Democracy, Human Dignity and Rule of Law, the effort to erase the ancient Christian origins of Hagia Sophia and to convert such a monument that belongs to the entire Human Civilization in such a brutal way is incomprehensible, deplorable and dangerous. Furthermore, we are sure that this will also have a significant impact on the ongoing inter-religious dialogue, since the site has powerful visible and invisible Christian symbols. The normative character of the values for which the European Union stands demands a firm solidary answer. The EU institutions, and especially the European Commission, as guardians of these European and Universal values and as the voice of European citizens, can play a unique role in preserving the world's cultural heritage, historical memory and religious pluralism. It is actually in moments like this that the significant role of the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU becomes ever-more obvious.

With that in mind we call upon all those of good will to react to the decision of the Turkish authorities for the conversion of Hagia Sofia into a mosque.