

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Greek delegation, allow me to wholeheartedly congratulate you and the other distinguished members of the Bureau, on your well deserved election. We are certain that, under your chairmanship, the work of General Conference will be crowned with success. We should be remiss if we did not express sincere appreciation to Director General Mrs. Irina Bokova, for her long and important contribution. We warmly congratulate Mrs. Audrey Azoulay. We do believe that the Organization, with the new Directorate General at its helm, will carry on its course intended for constructive action.

Mr Chairman,

I would wish to focus my intervention on the following points:

Greece is very actively involved in the fight against both the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in conflict areas and its side-consequences, namely the illicit trade of looted cultural property. Greece has already incorporated in its internal legal order Security Council Resolution 2199/2015 and, in this respect, is currently at the stage of adopting specific implementing regulations.

Brutal attacks against cultural heritage target not only historic monuments and sites of greatest importance for humanity, but also the very substance of human nature, which evolves through diversity. Therefore, respect for cultural diversity, namely respect for every possible form of past, present and future human art and expression, including religious monuments and sites, paves the way to reconciliation, coexistence, social cohesion and, thus, peace.

Over the past two years, Greece, an elected member to UNESCO's Executive Board, also held the Chairmanship of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which is the monitoring organ of the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954. Within this context, and following the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2199, the Committee, acting in cooperation with the Director-General of UNESCO, issued six consecutive Statements which condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq, as being a blatant violation of International Law and urged the International Community to unite and intensify its efforts to confront this unprecedented situation, caused by terrorist groups, such as ISIS.

Furthermore, Greece laid the foundations of the newly established mechanism for the monitoring of the 1970 UNESCO Convention against illicit trafficking in cultural goods and treasures (the so-called 'Subsidiary Committee') with a view, among others, to coordinate international cooperation for the protection of cultural property, particularly in case of armed conflict and for combating illicit trafficking of cultural treasures, mainly through successive Meetings of the Chairpersons of the Committees of the six UNESCO Culture Conventions.

Indicatively, we would like to mention the following initiatives undertaken by the 1954 Hague Convention Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict : a) Introduction of a new Distinctive Emblem for Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection, b) Establishment of Synergies with the other UNESCO's Culture Conventions, c) Military Manual on the protection of Cultural Property in the event of armed conflict.

(Culture for Sustainable Development)

As UNESCO's Culture Conventions are key for the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, Greece enforces the whole UNESCO's legal framework to its territory, with full respect for cultural diversity; particular emphasis is put on the cultural education of youth, mainly with the use of new technologies.

(Restitution of the Parthenon Sculptures)

As is well-known, Greece attaches major importance to the issue of return and restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin. In this context, Greece attaches great importance and highly appreciates the work and achievements of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP).

We reiterate our disappointment at the United Kingdom's refusal to accept UNESCO's invitation to initiate a mediation process on the issue of the Parthenon Sculptures, despite the relevant Recommendation of the ICPRCP.

Despite repetition of well-known British arguments concerning Greece's long-standing just demand for rehabilitating a unique world heritage monument which remains a mutilated 'wonder of the world', we call on the British Government to reconsider its stand, bearing in mind that the unity of the Parthenon is dictated not only by legal considerations but by international ethical principles as well.

(Hagia Sophia)

We do reiterate the commitment of all States to fully respect the World Heritage Monuments, Christian and Non-Christian alike, on their territory. Any attempt to alter the use of Hagia Sophia would be totally incompatible with its character as a Museum.

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