



CANADIAN HELLENIC CONGRESS
ΕΛΛΗΝΟΚΑΝΑΔΙΚΟ ΚΟΓΚΡΕΣΟ
CONGRÈS HELLÉNIQUE CANADIEN

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June 24, 2020

Via electronic mail:
ai-ci@unesco.org

Ms. Audrey Azoulay
Director-General – UNESCO
UNESCO Headquarters
7, Place de Fontenoy
75007 Paris, France

Subject: Turkey's hard stand to convert Hagia Sophia, the last great symbol of Christianity, into a mosque

Dear Ms. Azoulay,

On behalf of the Canadian Hellenic Congress, we are writing to you to express our deep concerns about Turkey's hard stand to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque, thus eliminating the last great symbol of Christianity through desecration and plastering the magnificent and unique architecture and iconography, as was done five centuries ago by the Ottoman conquerors.

Today, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants to complete the circle of desecration started by the Ottomans. Erdogan's grand-conversion scheme started on June 5, 2016 when his government permitted Muslim prayers to be read in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, originally an Orthodox Basilica. Since then, Koran readings and Muslim prayers have been held with Turkish government officials in attendance and now there is a strong push by the Turkish autocratic regime to wipe out the symbol of Christianity in that part of the world.

The Turkish government's policy of converting the Great Church into a mosque is a hostile act and insults all Christians throughout the world. Moreover, it is a blatant violation of Hagia Sophia's UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Hagia Sophia was the jewel of Orthodoxy and predates Saint Peter's cathedral in Rome by a thousand years. It has unique architectural features and iconography and is admired by scholars, historians and art experts. The Church reflects and embodies the inspiration of the Gospel and the deeply spiritual theology of the Greek fathers of Eastern Orthodoxy.

For over 900 years it was Christianity's greatest church and the seat of the Eastern Orthodoxy. In 1453, with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the Great Church and symbol of Orthodoxy was desecrated and converted into a mosque. The Church's magnificent

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The Canadian Hellenic Congress is a national democratic communal institution that represents, advances, advocates and promotes the interests and concerns of Canadians of Hellenic descent and Hellenism in general. The Congress is the national voice of Hellenes and their communities and/or organizations across Canada.



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iconography was plastered over by the Ottomans in order to permit Muslim worship.

In 1935 Hagia Sophia was turned into a museum by the then Turkish government and remained as such for over 80 years until the Erdrojan regime decided to turn the museum into a mosque. Turkey has a history of ignoring and not complying with its international obligations.

On July 2, 2020, Turkey's State Council will decide if Hagia Sophia can be re-converted back into a mosque.

Given Hagia Sophia's UNESCO World Heritage Site status, this is clearly a matter of international concern. As such, we urge the governing body of UNESCO to:

- (a) condemn this hostile action against Christianity;
- (b) demand that Turkey, as a member of UNESCO, comply with its obligations;
- (c) request that UNESCO take remedial action to protect and safeguard the site from further desecration; and,
- (d) propose to the UN that a special status be created for the Hagia Sophia site whose purpose will be to saving and preventing future desecration of the Church and permanently ensuring that Hagia Sophia, as a site of extraordinary historical significance, is shared by all faiths and peoples.

We trust you will give this matter the attention and action it deserves.

Sincerely,

Dr. Theodore Halatsis
President

Dr. Costas Pappas
V-P, Administration and Secretary

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