

**Address by Mr Ioannis KASOULIDES,
Chair of the Committee of Ministers and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Cyprus
Colloquium**

**“Initiatives to strengthen international capacities for the protection of cultural property and the prevention of illicit trafficking in cultural goods – the Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property”
(Strasbourg, 13 January 2017)**

Dear Secretary General,
Distinguished guests, esteemed representatives of member states,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to welcome you today at this *Colloquium on building synergies and improving the framework for the protection of cultural heritage*. This is an issue of particular interest to the Council of Europe, as well as to the Cypriot Chairmanship, but it's also an issue of global significance. Our aim is to explore innovative approaches, to seek synergies and to foster capacity-building to effectively protect cultural property from destruction and to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural artefacts. The Council of Europe has a crucial role to play in protecting cultural heritage and the Convention on Offences Related to Cultural Property, which is currently being drafted, will be an important legal tool towards this end.

Ladies and Gentlemen, these past few years we have witnessed a surge on attacks against great monuments of global historical and cultural significance. Notably, in Iraq and Syria, from Nimrud to Palmyra, the terrorists of Daesh have systematically plundered the region's cultural heritage, deliberately destroying important archaeological sites and profiting from the sale of valuable excavated artefacts. The aim of destruction is twofold: to raise funds for their terrorist action; indeed the illicit trafficking of artefacts is a major source of terrorist financing. At the same time, the perpetrators seek through these attacks to uproot the cultural and ethnological connection of the local populations from their land; that is, they pursue a “cultural genocide.” Such actions, however, are not directed only against the people of the country where they are perpetrated, but against our shared history and the cultural identity of humanity as a whole. As stated in the preamble of the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of Armed Conflict*, “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of mankind.”

This increased, in scale and frequency, destruction of cultural heritage, accentuated but not limited in armed conflicts, renders the need for our collective and unified response even more compelling. Last year in Namur, we the member states of the Council of Europe made a Call and I quote, “we decided to initiate a discussion in the Council of Europe to reinforce European Cooperation, including on legal instruments, on the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage and illicit trafficking of cultural property.”

In its Recommendation 2071 (2015) on “Cultural Heritage in crisis and post-crisis situations” PACE underlines that through a culture of respect and tolerance for the historical, religious and cultural monuments, the respect for peace will be cultivated. Thus respect for cultural heritage is a means of enhancing democratic security.

Culture has been one of the primary subjects of policy of the Council of Europe since its inception, developed to protect and promote the diversity and the common civilization of its member states. It is as much in focus today, as part of the Council's Action Plan on Building Inclusive Societies and the preparation of the European Cultural Strategy for the 21st century.

Cyprus attaches particular importance to the protection of cultural heritage, having in mind our own historical experiences, and we seek to contribute effectively to the responses of the international community. Last March, Cyprus led a cross-regional Statement on the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict in the framework of the Human Rights Council. The statement was co-sponsored by 146 members and observer states of the HRC. In September 2016, in collaboration with a core group of partners, Cyprus presented to the Thirty-Third Session of the HRC in Geneva, a comprehensive Resolution on "*Cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage*" which was unanimously adopted, thus putting the issue of cultural heritage firmly in the Human Rights agenda.

Cyprus along with UNIDROIT are organising a seminar in New York on *Promoting and Strengthening the international legal framework* particularly on combating and preventing the trafficking of stolen and illegally exported artefacts and overcoming hindrances to their effective restitution, building on existing instruments such as Security Council Resolutions, the UNESCO Convention of 1970 and the UNIDROIT Convention of 1995.

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe decided in March 2016 to prepare a new Convention on Offences Relating to Cultural Property. This new Convention will become the only international treaty focusing on criminal measures and sanctions on illicit activities – such as the destruction and trafficking of cultural goods, while also providing a complete set of measures to foster international co-operation between States to better prevent and combat the illicit trafficking and the deliberate destruction of cultural property.

I would like to pay tribute to the dedicated and highly expert work of national representatives and the Council Secretariat in preparing this new legal instrument, which will be open for accession to non-member states. This instrument will be a most effective tool in our efforts to improve and unify domestic legislation and international legal co-operation, to provide an effective framework ending impunity and improving the means of protection.

Cyprus has already declared its wish to have the Convention open for signature during the Ministerial Conference, which will take place in Nicosia this coming May. Appreciating that deliberations for a text effective for the purposes for which it is designed might require a longer period to come to fruition, Cyprus stands ready to host the opening Conference, whenever the Convention is ready for signature.

I would like to thank our distinguished Speakers for kindly accepting our invitation to address the Colloquium and share with us their perspective on improving international capacities to combat the destruction of cultural property and the illicit trade of cultural goods. I would also like to thank all the participants, as their presence today is a testament of the readiness of our countries to undertake our shared responsibility to protect and bequeath to future generations their rights to their cultural heritage.