

Brussels, 29/4/22

Honourable Director-General,

We, the undersigned Members of the European Parliament, are following up on the letter we sent you on 16 July 2020, regarding the uptake of necessary measures to safeguard Hagia Sofia, a World Heritage Site of universal importance.

As you already know, Hagia Sophia was declared a museum in 1934 by a decree issued by Kemal Ataturk. UNESCO has declared it a World Heritage Site in 1985. Following the Council of State of Turkey ruling, UNESCO issued an announcement on the 10th of July underlining that “Hagia Sophia, part of the property Historic Areas of Turkey, is inscribed on the World Heritage List as a museum. This inscription entails a number of legal commitments and obligations. Thus, a State must ensure that no modification is made to the outstanding universal value of the property inscribed on its territory. Any modification requires prior notification by the State concerned to UNESCO and then, if necessary, examination by the World Heritage Committee”

UNESCO furthermore recalled that “effective, inclusive and equitable participation of communities and other stakeholders concerned by the property is a necessary condition for the preservation of heritage and for the enhancement of its uniqueness and significance. This requirement serves the protection and transmission of the outstanding universal value of heritage and is inherent to the Spirit of the World Heritage Convention”.

However, Turkey ignored UNESCO’s concerns and turned Hagia Sophia into a mosque on July 2020. As a result, Hagia Sophia ceased to be a museum, and all religious icons and frescoes inside the temple were covered by white curtains.

It goes without saying that not only the measures of safeguarding and protecting the site, but also the possible behaviour of the visitors, once its official use has changed, are no longer appropriate for a World Heritage Site.

Following the above, on April 18, the Turkish Art History Association denounced the vandalism of the Hagia Sophia Imperial Gate, which is the largest gate of Hagia Sophia, is 7 meters high and is made of iron and wood. It is the main gateway to Hagia Sophia and was used only by the Emperor. The door is said to have been made of the wood of Noah’s Ark, which was made of oak.

In this regard, we call you to take proper action in order to safeguard this World Heritage Site, to protect international agreements and the UNESCO framework and to uphold our core European values and principles.