

The Hague, 18 May 2020

**To the urgent personal attention of
Ms Nina Obuljen – Koržinek
Minister of Culture
Acting Chair of the EU Council of Ministers**

Re: Strong condemnation of the brutal demolition of the Albanian National Theater in Tirana

*Dear Madam Minister,
Dear Madam Chair of the EU Council of Ministers,*

On the eve of tomorrow's meeting (via video conference) of the EU Council of Ministers at which EU Ministers of Culture are expected to adopt the Council conclusions on "Fostering European cooperation with regard to cultural heritage at risk", we urge you to transmit to all members of the EU Council our strongest condemnation of the brutal demolition of the National Theater in Tirana which took place yesterday.

As you might know, a large alliance composed of artists, intellectuals, heritage experts and civil society activists have been fighting - for several years now - for the preservation (with necessary renovation) of the National Theater in Tirana. Europa Nostra has expressed its support to these endeavours as early as in 2018, during the European Year of Cultural Heritage and has conveyed our concerns about the planned demolition of this Theater to the highest authorities of Albania. More recently, the National Theater in Tirana has been included on the 2020 List of 7 Most Endangered Sites in Europe. This was made public on 24 March 2020 jointly by Europa Nostra and by our invaluable partner the European Investment Bank Institute. The European Commission – through EU Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, has also expressed its support to the safeguard of all sites included on our List, including the National Theater in Tirana.

Following last week's dangerous escalation of the situation caused by the transfer of the responsibility for the Theater to the Municipality of Tirana and a decision to demolish the Theater – taken behind closed doors – by the Municipal Council of Tirana, Europa Nostra made a public statement opposing any attempts to demolish an emblematic building located in the protected historic ensemble in the centre of Tirana, and supported by experts and civil society activists. EU Commissioner Mariya Gabriel the next day urged the Albanian authorities to engage in a constructive dialogue with civil society and experts of cultural heritage before taking any irreversible decisions. Moreover, the President of the Republic had submitted a request to the Constitutional Court of Albania to examine the legality of the decision by the Municipal Council to demolish the Theater.



**The Voice of
Cultural Heritage
in Europe**

**La Voix du
patrimoine culturel
en Europe**

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Instead of taking the time to examine the legality of their decision, and opening the dialogue with civil society and experts, the Albanian authorities decided to make use of the last day of the special health emergency measures taken in response to the COVID19 pandemic, to demolish the theater. In the very early morning hours of Sunday, 17 May, they sent a large number of policemen to surround the Theater and to arrest about 30 artists and civil society activists who have been guarding the theater 24/24 hours per day for the last two years. They have also sent bulldozers to brutally demolish the theater: not only they erased and transformed into rubble an important record of the early history of Tirana as the capital city of Albania, but also all the objects and archives which formed part of the memory of this important cultural institution.

Europa Nostra, the European Voice of Civil Society committed to Cultural Heritage, wishes to convey to the EU Ministers of Culture the expression of our strong condemnation of this brutal act. We believe that 17 May was a sad day for cultural heritage in Albania and in Europe as a whole. And it was also a sad day for democracy and respect of the rule of law and human rights in Albania and in Europe as a whole.

We urge the EU Ministers to re-iterate that the protection of cultural heritage and of our cultural and historical memory represents one of the fundamental EU values and express their solidarity with all citizens in Albania who are dedicated to the safeguard of the cultural identity of their country, which forms part of Europe's shared and diverse history and culture.

We also urge the EU Ministers of Culture to insist on the importance of culture and cultural heritage within the on-going process of the enlargement of the European Union.

Europa Nostra stays at the disposal of the EU Council of Ministers, and of all EU Institutions to foster European cooperation for the protection of our cultural heritage, as a powerful catalyst for the future of Europe, to quote our Europe Day Manifesto adopted on 9 May 2020.

Respectfully and cordially yours,



Dr Hermann Parzinger
Executive President

Copies:

Ms Mariya Gabriel, EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education, Youth and Sport

Mr Oliver Varhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

Mr Josep Borrell, EC Vice-President & HR for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy