



PRESS RELEASE

European experts release report for the rehabilitation of Post-Byzantine monuments in Voskopoja and Vithkuqi

13 December 2018 – **Europa Nostra**, the leading heritage organisation in Europe, and the **European Investment Bank Institute** issued today a [technical and financial report](#) comprising an action plan to restore **twelve Post-Byzantine religious buildings in Voskopoja and Vithkuqi in the Korça region in south-east Albania**. The religious buildings were listed among the [7 Most Endangered heritage sites in Europe in 2018](#), following a nomination made by “**The Past for the Future**” Foundation.

The report was formulated on the basis of the outcome of the four-day mission in Albania undertaken on 18-21 September 2018. During the mission, heritage and financial experts from Europa Nostra and the European Investment Bank Institute visited the Post-Byzantine religious structures in Voskopoja and Vithkuqi and met with national authorities – including **Evis Koplaku**, Director at the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, the Minister of Culture **Mirela Kumbaro**, the leading representative of the Orthodox Church in Korça, Voskopoja and Vithkuqi **Johan Pelushi**, non-governmental civil society organisations and other stakeholders –, with the aim of mobilising efforts towards saving these iconic religious buildings.

This group of twelve religious buildings comprises ten churches and two monasteries, the earliest dating from the late 14th century and most dating from the 17th and 18th century. These churches represent a new architectural and unique form of basilica combining the Byzantine and Ottoman traditions. The frescos are the most representative of 17th-18th century ecclesiastical art in the Balkans and are masterpieces of the post-Byzantine style.

“These churches are exceptional by their history and form and contain very remarkable works of art which merit to be restored as cultural heritage as well as for the potential tourism benefits to this undeveloped region. An opportunity to fund such works is becoming available and this should be taken by ensuring that a sound dossier and programme are prepared and various improvements in resourcing, quality and coordination are adopted as recommended,” highlights the report.

“The Ministry of Culture has been particularly involved in starting to restore these monuments in the Korça region through its local Regional Department of Cultural Heritage, part of the Institute of Cultural Heritage based in Tirana. Most of the twelve buildings have had some essential protective restoration undertaken recently. Funding and resources have been limited and the works carried out seem to have been fitted in as the resources became available rather than forming part of a structured long-term programme. Nevertheless, the works seem to have been done rationally with initial attention being paid to protection by repairing the roof structures and also to the main structural integrity of the buildings. (...) While much useful work has been undertaken not all has been to the high standard expected for these exceptional monuments,” notes the report.

The following proposed actions and recommendations are put forward in the report:

- A strategic programme seems to be lacking. Attention should be placed on developing such a rational programme so as to obtain funds, and to plan and programme optimally. Such a [Strategic Review and the establishment of an Overall Programme](#) is proposed as a first action.
- Such an Overall Programme should be practical and sufficiently flexible. It should involve discussions and cooperation with other interested parties to gain support. The Orthodox Church, the Korça Municipality, the local village representatives and local experts should be more actively engaged and encouraged to contribute, and greater efforts should be made in this respect. Some form of structured contacts, for example through a [Coordination Committee](#) under the aegis of the Institute of Cultural Heritage (ICH), would be useful to improve decision making and involve locals more closely with the programme. Agreement is necessary on a maintenance programme after restoration.
- Some technical issues where inadequacies have occurred (e.g. church flooding, poor roof repairs, works programming - serious cracking while roof repairs underway) require review and improvement

to avoid re-occurrence. Improved contractor selection, firmer specifications and much stronger site supervision are recommended. The recently permitted use of external consultants should be encouraged to help solve these issues.

- The restoration of the frescos is now the principal activity, representing more than 70% of the new work. The scale of work proposed is considerably greater than previously and will require additional resources as until now most fresco restoration has been carried out by the small dedicated team within the Regional Directorate of Cultural Heritage (RDCH) in Korça.
- In addition, some skill enhancement for improving the restoration techniques is recommended as some weaknesses are perceived. Some form of training or structured workshops from external experts would be highly desirable, similar to that already carried out. Encouragement should be given to issuing scientific documentation with ideally open access to data for researchers.
- Particular efforts need to be made to ensure that funding through the various mechanisms available from the European Union and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) are used to the benefit of the project. Sound preparation and presentation are important as well as the optimal timing of actions and decision making so as to achieve this.
- The project should be integrated into the Korça development strategy at the wider level. This should focus not only on the churches restoration but the economic impact of such restoration. The project can help to support the consolidation and expansion of labour-intensive economic sectors, such as small hotels/accommodation and construction, with positive impacts. These impacts should encourage support for better road access, infrastructure and tourism development in the Region.

According to the report, the overall rehabilitation project for the twelve religious buildings is estimated to cost about **4.3 million euros**. These estimates are preliminary and will need confirming when more details of the actual works will become available. Two alternatives have been costed, namely a Priority Phase of three churches costing 1.4 million euros and a programme of all the Voskopoja and Vithkuqi churches at 2.5 million euros. A phased approach is proposed with an Initial Study to give a strategic overall view to orient the programme. This would be followed by a Preparatory Phase with more detailed surveys to define more clearly the work required and to finalise the priorities before launching the project.

The full technical and financial report can be downloaded [here](#).

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TO FIND OUT MORE

[Photos of the monuments in high-resolution](#)

<http://7mostendangered.eu/>

twitter.com/europanostra

youtube.com/user/EuropaNostraChannel

Background information

The 7 Most Endangered programme

[The 7 Most Endangered programme](#) identifies endangered monuments and sites in Europe and mobilizes public and private partners on a local, national and European level to find a viable future for those sites. The programme was launched in 2013 by **Europa Nostra** with the **European Investment Bank Institute** as founding partner and the Council of Europe Development Bank as associated partner. It was inspired by a successful similar project run by the US National Trust for Historic Preservation. The 7 Most Endangered is not a funding programme. It is a catalyst for action and promotes “the power of example”. The 7 Most Endangered is supported by the **Creative Europe** programme of the European Union, as part of Europa Nostra’s networking project ‘Sharing Heritage – Sharing Values’.

Since 2013, 29 threatened monuments and heritage sites from 19 countries across Europe have been selected for the 7 Most Endangered. The first list was published in 2013, the second list in 2014, the third list in 2016 and the fourth list in 2018, during the European Year of Cultural Heritage. In 2016, the Venice Lagoon in Italy was declared *the* most endangered heritage site in Europe.

An international advisory panel, comprising specialists in history, archaeology, architecture, conservation and finance, meet to discuss the applications submitted to the 7 Most Endangered programme and to shortlist the most threatened monuments and sites. The final list of 7 sites is selected by the Board of Europa Nostra. Heritage and financial experts from Europa Nostra and the European Investment Bank Institute undertake missions to the 7 sites, together with the nominators. The multidisciplinary teams assess the sites and help formulate a feasible action plan for each of them, in close cooperation with national and local public and private stakeholders. The results and recommendations of these missions are summarised in technical and financial reports. The programme partners assist with the implementation of these [reports](#).

Europa Nostra

[Europa Nostra](#) is the pan-European federation of heritage NGO's which is also supported by a wide network of public bodies, private companies and individuals. Covering more than 40 countries in Europe, the organisation is the voice of civil society committed to safeguarding and promoting Europe's cultural and natural heritage. Founded in 1963, it is today recognised as the most representative heritage network in Europe. Plácido Domingo, the world-renowned opera singer, is the President of the organisation.

Europa Nostra campaigns to save Europe's endangered monuments, sites and landscapes, in particular through the [7 Most Endangered programme](#). It celebrates excellence through the EU Prize for Cultural Heritage / Europa Nostra Awards. It also contributes to the formulation and implementation of European strategies and policies related to heritage, through a structured dialogue with European Institutions and the coordination of the European Heritage Alliance 3.3. Europa Nostra is an official partner and has been greatly contributing to the [European Year of Cultural Heritage](#) 2018.

European Investment Bank Institute

The [European Investment Bank Institute](#) (EIBI) was set up within the EIB Group (European Investment Bank and European Investment Fund) to promote and support social, cultural, and academic initiatives with European stakeholders and the public at large. It is a key pillar of the EIB Group's community and citizenship engagement. More information on <http://institute.eib.org>

Creative Europe

[Creative Europe](#) is the EU programme that supports the cultural and creative sectors, enabling them to increase their contribution to jobs and growth. With a budget of €1.46 billion for 2014-2020, it supports organisations in the fields of heritage, performing arts, fine arts, interdisciplinary arts, publishing, film, TV, music, and video games as well as tens of thousands of artists, cultural and audiovisual professionals. The funding allows them to operate across Europe, to reach new audiences and to develop the skills required in the digital age.

“The Past for the Future” Foundation

The Past for the Future Foundation is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2002 with the protection, study, conservation and restoration of historical monuments and cultural heritage as its objective. The centre of the foundation is in Korca, Southeast Albania – an area with a great number and variety of historical monuments, while the activity of the foundation is extended in all of Albania. The foundation has greatly contributed to many projects, including studies and works related to the protection of pre-industrial architecture and technology in Albania, archaeological surveys on pre-historical monuments, conservation works on art and architecture of Byzantine and post-Byzantine monuments and the protection of urban areas.