

Intervention of Androula Vassiliou at the panel discussion on the topic “What role does C.H play in the formation of a ‘European Way of Life’ and how can it be promoted today?” in Paris on 30th October 2019.

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me take you back to that awful night when we were all witnessing through our TV screens the destruction, by fire, of Notre Damme de Paris. All of us, irrespective of nationality were feeling a pain in our chest and shed a lot of tears. Why? Was it a church in Cyprus? Was it a church in Germany, Denmark or Romania? No, but we all felt the pain. This is indeed the power of our European Cultural Heritage.

CH has a value in its own right that is not only material, since it embeds ideals, principles and values that constitute a shared source of remembrance, understanding, identity, dialogue, cohesion and creativity for Europe. It is therefore understandable that despite the fact that Cultural heritage is an area of competence of the MSs, article 3(3) of the Treaty of the EU states that **“the Union shall ensure that Europe’s C.H. is safeguarded and enhanced”**. And indeed the C.H. sector receives assistance from many EU policies and actions beyond the cultural ones. The EU Solidarity Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, under the Digital Agenda, all these contribute, in addition to the funds provided by the Creative Europe Program.

A European initiative that is not very widely known is the European Heritage Label which was my first initiative as EU Commissioner for Culture.

European Heritage sites are milestones in the creation of today’s Europe. Spanning from the dawn of civilization to the Europe of today, these sites celebrate and symbolize Europe’s ideals, values, history and integration. Therefore the 38 sites to which this label has been awarded since 2013, have been carefully selected not for their beauty but for their symbolic value and the role they played in the European history and integration.

I will give you just a few examples of the selected sites:

The Heart of Ancient Athens. The Acropolis and the surrounding archeological sites constitute an architectural ensemble of up to 11 monuments representing the core of ancient Athens, spanning a period of over 3000 years.

Philosophy, public speaking, democracy, theatre and music were practiced and developed here.

The Leipzig's Musical Heritage Sites is a series of nine locations in Leipzig representing various episodes in its musical history including churches and educational institutions, ensembles and individual composers. The site embodies the dynamic continuity of a specific European tradition in music and civic engagement.

The former Natzweiler concentration camp and its satellite camps in France and Germany where prisoners from almost all the European countries were subject to Nazi terror , is today both a place of remembrance and citizens' education.

Finally I wish to mention **the Charter of Law of the Abolition of the Death Penalty** which was approved in 1867 and is preserved in the National Archives of Torre do Tombo in Lisbon. This document is very important because it promotes values which are now part of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.

Allow me now to come to something which is very close to my heart and my everyday life. You all know of course that my country, Cyprus remains still divided and my city, Nicosia, remains the only divided city of Europe.

In 2008, intercommunal negotiations were resumed between the Leaders of the two communities with the aim of finding a solution to the Cyprus Problem. They also decided about different confidence building measures. Recognizing the damage caused to our cultural heritage, historic and religious monuments and sites on both sides of the dividing line, as a result of the arm hostilities in 1974 and since then, as a result of abandonment and neglect, the two Leaders decided to establish a Bi Communal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage. This Committee is co-chaired by two Cypriots, a GC and a TC and its members are also from both communities.

The Technical Committee has developed from the very beginning a common vision of the importance of cultural heritage for Cyprus and as important symbols for all communities of Cyprus as well as for humanity as a whole.

Particular attention was given to the archeological importance of the monuments, reflecting their uniqueness, historical significance and role in society as well as their future educational role.

Since 2012 the work of the Committee has been strongly supported by the European Commission which in a period of 6 years (2012-2018) provided approximately a total of €15 mil. in order to enable the Committee to implement its priorities. One of the tens of monuments that have been restored by the Committee is the famous Othello Tower and the citadel which form the key defensive position of the city of Famagusta. Its significance as well as its sense of age and mystery are evident walking through the portals of the citadel, with the Lion of Venice still presiding after hundreds of years. “We are not just restoring CH, we are also restoring our link with history” said a member of the Committee.

Small projects do not lack significance, either. They create trust among the two communities and encourage cooperation among them.

One final aspect of this Committee’s contribution in bringing the two communities together is their educational program. The Committee actively works to create an interactive educational program that gives the younger generation of TCs and GCs the opportunity to learn about each other and the cultural heritage of their island.

In partnership with the UNDP, it offers university graduates and undergraduate students the possibility to visit project sites while conservation works are ongoing. This gives students a behind-the-scenes look at the practical work of the committee and how it aims to bring Cypriots closer to their shared heritage. Over the past two years, more than 2000 students have had this unique opportunity.

Moreover, recently, the Committee invited young people interested in CH to a special gathering where they explained to them their work and their objectives and selected 30 of them to become ambassadors of their work both in Cyprus and abroad, with emphasis on the importance of CH for Cyprus and all its people but also for Europe as a whole.

Finally let me mention briefly, the very important program of Europa Nostra undertaken together with the European Investment Bank Institute, called “The 7 most endangered Heritage Monuments and Sites in Europe” aimed at identifying such sites in danger and mobilize efforts to save them. One of the first sites to be identified as such by the Jury in 2013 was the Buffer Zone of Nicosia. As we know, our cultural heritage connects generations as it reflects cross fertilizations and cross-border movements of people and ideas over

many centuries of shared history. And this could not be more evident than this particular area of Nicosia which was once a thriving commercial center where merchants from the East and the west were doing business and which now stands silent and falling apart as a result of hostilities, years of abandonment and neglect. This year with its rare heavy rainfall, saw the destruction of an 11th century old church in this Buffer zone of Nicosia and I am afraid other important buildings will follow suit.

A total of 29 heritage sites and monuments around Europe have been declared as most endangered by Europa Nostra since 2013 and they all need restoration, urgently.

We owe it to succeeding generations of Europeans to restore and protect all these sites under threat and as a Vice President of Europa Nostra I feel very proud we have set up to ourselves this important mission.