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Attitude to memorials exposed to different historical interpretations in Council of Europe member states

Reply to Recommendation[1]: Recommendation 1859 (2009)
Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has noted with interest Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1859 (2009) on the "Attitude to memorials exposed to different historical interpretations in Council of Europe member states" and has brought it to the attention of the governments of its member states.

2. In view of its wealth of experience in the field of history teaching, and finding support for its action in the renewed commitment, expressed by the Heads of State and Government at the Third Summit, to the common values and principles inherent in Europe's cultural, religious and humanist heritage, the Council of Europe has a role to play in maintaining the objective historical memory in the member states. The nurturing of citizens aware of their European and universal environment, capable of critical analysis and judgment and conscious of the cultural diversity of their society is part of this objective, as is the development of awareness among citizens of the dangers of totalitarian regimes of any political orientation, bearing in mind Europe's history of the 20th century.

3. The Committee of Ministers reasserts its attachment to the general principles and guidelines relating to history teaching in the 21st century as set out in its Recommendation Rec(2001)15. It places particular emphasis on the value of active educational approaches to foster the acquisition of skills and attitudes based on a sense of dialogue, respect for others and tolerance, and the taking into account of multi-perspectivity and individual analysis and research capabilities. These approaches can also be applied to raising awareness of memorials and the way they are interpreted and protected as parts of cultural heritage and historically symbolic places, particularly with regard to the forthcoming 65th anniversary of the victory over Nazism, which will be commemorated in 2010.

4. The project "Day of remembrance of the Holocaust and for the prevention of crimes against humanity", undertaken by the Steering Committee for Education (CDED), also highlights the educational, preventive and socialising functions of memorials. Several activities have been co-organised in recent years at authentic places of remembrance. These have included meetings to raise awareness of the importance of developing appropriate curricula for teaching Holocaust remembrance as a means of preventing crimes against humanity, and training sessions for trainers which have been held at places of remembrance. The Committee of Ministers attaches considerable importance to the activities carried out under this project and is closely studying its future orientations, including ways to facilitate international exchanges on certain historical issues. It also welcomes the prospects to be opened up by the Memorandum of Understanding with the Task Force for International Co-operation on Holocaust, Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF).

5. With regard to the specific recommendations made by the Assembly, the Committee of Ministers brings to the latter's attention the comments and suggestions made by the Steering Committee for Cultural Heritage and Landscape (CDPATEP) appended to this reply. Regarding more specifically the creation of a centre of expertise in historiographical and archaeological investigation, the Committee of Ministers, bearing in mind current budgetary constraints, does not envisage following up this proposal.

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1. adopted at the 1080th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (24 March 2010)

Appendix to the reply

Comments by the Steering Committee for Cultural Heritage and Landscape (CDPATEP)

1. The Steering Committee for Cultural Heritage and Landscape (CDPATEP) took note with interest of the text of the Parliamentary Assembly recommendation and the various suggestions it makes. It would point out first of all that although its work to date has not addressed the subject of memorials directly, it has produced ideas in line with the issues raised by the Assembly.

2. In the context of general analysis of the significance of cultural heritage in changing societies, for instance, the publication "Dividing lines, connecting lines – Europe's cross-border heritage" saw discussion in 2004 of the issue of the often divergent successive or parallel interpretations of heritage situated in regions which have experienced conflicts or changes in sovereignty. The discussions were then carried forward during the preparation of the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro, 2005) which, for the first time in a text of that legal standing, included provisions on heritage interpretation while highlighting the concept of the "common heritage of Europe". Under Article 7 of the Convention, entitled "Cultural heritage and dialogue", public authorities are called on to "encourage reflection on the ethics and methods of presentation of the cultural heritage, as well as respect for diversity of interpretations" and to "establish processes for conciliation to deal equitably with situations where contradictory values are placed on the same cultural heritage by different communities".

3. Even before the process of ratification and entry into force of the Faro Convention has been completed, a multidisciplinary group of experts continued the discussion of these issues as part of the post-Summit Project "Cultural identities, shared values and citizenship" (2005-2007), which led to the publication of a "Handbook on values for life in a democracy" and a "European Manifesto for multiple cultural affiliation". Point 7 of the Manifesto states that, for a citizen of a Europe which attaches importance to the fundamental values supported in particular by the Council of Europe, "to know one's own history means understanding the history of the Other and incorporating that history in one's own". Bearing in mind that the archaeological heritage and the architectural heritage are essential to knowledge of the past, this approach should be seen alongside the earlier work in the area of heritage teaching and the education sector's work on multiperspectivity in history teaching. The Council of Europe's innovative action in this area was highlighted at the first European Heritage Forum on "Heritage and Dialogue" (Belgium, 2008) organised in the context of the European Heritage Days – a joint action of the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

4. The CDPATEP will return to the issue of perceptions and interpretations of heritage in connection with the monitoring of the conventions. It believes that the Assembly's suggestion that steps be taken to promote the organisation of international conferences of experts on the interpretation of historical heritage which is the subject of controversy (point 3.1 of the recommendation) is entirely appropriate. Such conferences could be held with the practical assistance of national and local authorities and draw up specific case studies providing input for more general work on heritage interpretation.

5. In the CDPATEP's view, the development of a common database on memorials and a project on good practice regarding intercultural interpretation could be an area for co-operation between individual countries and/or NGOs wishing to take action in that respect. The HEREIN network could, if need be, offer technical support for disseminating the outcomes subject to the availability of the necessary financial resources. Future commemoration of the First World War, a major focus of the collective memory of Europeans and also of other parts of the world, could provide an opportunity for developing one or more projects concerning memorial sites of truly international significance. It is up to the member states to take initiatives that they consider useful to this end.