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Parliamentary questions to the Chairperson-in-Office of the Committee of Ministers

Parliamentary questions

1. Question from Ms Nina KASIMATI, Greece, UEL

For the first time in 80 years, the Turkish authorities decided to authorise daily Quran recitations inside Hagia Sophia, a World Heritage Site officially recognised by UNESCO and a basilica with unquestionable importance for Orthodox Christianity.

The implementation of the aforementioned decision tends to convert Hagia Sophia from a museum into a Muslim mosque, thus disregarding the international cultural and historical value of this monument and disrespecting the religious sensibilities of Christians from all over the world.

Moreover, such outdated actions are directly opposed to the values of modern, democratic, all-inclusive societies and incite fanaticism and religious intolerance, instead of contributing to the promotion of multiculturalism and interfaith understanding.

In the light of this situation, I would like to ask you what actions the Committee of Ministers intends to take to persuade the Turkish authorities to comply with the Council of Europe standards concerning respect and protection of the universal cultural identity of Hagia Sophia?

Reply by the Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers

Cultural heritage is a key component of the identity of each country but also of Europe in general when linked to the history of our continent. It is of general public interest and its transmission to future generations is a shared responsibility.

The Council of Europe considers that European identity should be based on shared fundamental values – including freedom of thought, conscience and religion – and on respect for its common heritage and cultural diversity.

Hagia Sophia, as a World Heritage Site and a precious testimony from the past, is indeed a reflection of the European cultural identity, with its evolving values, beliefs and traditions.

However, I am not convinced that Quran recitations inside Hagia Sophia would disregard the cultural and historical value of the monument nor imply any manifestation of fanaticism or religious intolerance. I would rather draw attention to the importance of continued free access for all to the museum which enables all individuals, regardless of their belief or any other consideration, to enjoy the beauty of this unique monument.

2. Question from Mr Andrej HUNKO, Germany, UEL

How did the Committee of Ministers deal with the critical situation of democracy, human rights and rule of law in Turkey before and after the attempted military coup in Turkey and with relation to the measures taken by the Turkish authorities thereafter – including suspension of judges, removal of State officials on a massive



scale, violation of the freedom of the press including the closure of numerous news outlets and arrests on a massive scale, removal of elected mayors – that led to accusations of torture not only in special cases but as a widespread phenomenon, and what decisions did the Committee of Ministers make?

Reply by the Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers

The Committee of Ministers has been, through its Chair, in close contact with the Turkish Government since the coup attempt of 15 July 2016. Already on 16 July, the then Chair of the Committee made a statement firmly condemning the coup attempt, expressing support for the democratically elected authorities and reiterating the readiness of the Council of Europe to continue to provide assistance to Turkey on the basis of the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In another statement dated 19 July, she recalled that, as a Council of Europe member State, Turkey was bound by all the commitments deriving from the European Convention on Human Rights and its additional protocols.

The Ministers' Deputies subsequently held an informal meeting on 5 August, during which the Secretary General reported on the talks he had held two days previously in Ankara with Turkey's highest authorities. The Chair of the Committee of Ministers also visited Ankara on 24 and 25 August for further discussions. Finally, on 7 September, the Ministers' Deputies held an exchange of views with Mr Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, attended by several foreign affairs ministers and other high-level representatives of member States.

The Committee of Ministers will continue to follow closely developments in Turkey and the assistance provided by the Council of Europe in this context. In this respect it welcomes the meetings held on 2 September in Strasbourg and at the end of September in Ankara between experts of the Turkish Ministry of Justice and representatives of the secretariat to discuss the compatibility with the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights of the measures taken under the state of emergency. It looks forward to the follow-up of these meetings. It also notes that a delegation of the CPT recently visited Turkey between 29 August and 6 September 2016. The Committee of Ministers also welcomes the visit by the Commissioner for Human Rights to Turkey between 27 and 29 September.