**Ιntervention of Minister Kasoulides on “Mobilizing governments’ and stakeholders’ action at the international level to protect cultural heritage”**

Dear Mr. Chair,

Dear Madame Special Rapporteur,

Distinguished guests, esteemed representatives of member states,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me first to thank you for the invitation to address the Intersessional Workshop on Cultural Rights and the Protection of Cultural Heritage. I am honored to participate in this Session with the other distinguished speakers.

It was during my tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus back in 2016 that Cyprus, with the indispensable support of other States, coordinated the adoption of the “Resolution on Cultural Rights and the protection of cultural heritage” by the Human Rights Council. This Resolution introduced the issue of cultural heritage firmly in the Human Rights agenda. The Human Rights Council can, indeed, play an important role in the global efforts to protect, restore and preserve cultural heritage, with a view to promoting universal respect for cultural rights by all.

Any loss of cultural heritage is a collective loss for all humanity. To quote the famous decision by a US Court on the Kanakaria mosaics stolen from Cyprus: *“*Onlythe lowest of scoundrelsattempt to reap personal gain from this collective loss.” Therefore, all competent international and regional organizations and agencies need to create synergies, in accordance with their respective mandates, without duplication. This is an endeavour to which the Human Rights Council has a major role to play, since cultural rights are inseparable from human rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My second tenure as Foreign Minister of Cyprus sadly coincided with the appalling destruction of the World Heritage Site of Palmyra and historic monuments in Iraq by Daesh terrorists, as well as with the destruction of World Heritage Sites in Mali. The aim of terrorists was twofold: to raise funds for their heinous actions; and also to pursue a “cultural genocide” by eradicating local culture.

Those shocking images were the driving force for international action for the protection of cultural heritage, including UN Security Council Resolutions 2199/2015 and 2347/2017, which were adopted unanimously.

However, our long-term commitment to the protection of cultural heritage is sorely needed. This topic cannot afford to be dropped off the international community’s priority list, nor should we wait for another shocking destruction of a cultural heritage site in order to re-prioritize it. Governments, peacekeepers and humanitarian actors have a duty to compel all armed conflict parties to abide by their International Humanitarian Law obligations, including for the protection of cultural heritage.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The momentum that followed the destruction of Palmyra, also contributed to the decision of the Council of Europe to work on a new Convention targeting the reinforcement of the existing framework for the protection of cultural heritage. We were able, in fact, under the Cyprus Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers in 2016-17 to conclude it in Nicosia in May 2017. This is the first international legal text which incorporates a criminal code and the imposition of criminal sanctions for perpetrators who, *inter alia*, destroy, steal, unlawfully excavate or trade cultural heritage

I warmly welcome the recent ratifications of the Convention by Greece and Latvia. With one additional ratification, it enters into force. This will allow states beyond Europe to ratify this important instrument that was designed to become a universal Convention. The representatives of the Council of Europe will explain more about the benefits and the importance of the Nicosia Convention during the afternoon session.

An evident choice of action for Governments, civil society and other stakeholders in favor of cultural heritage is, therefore, to lobby for more ratifications and implementation in the national legislations of the Nicosia Convention and of the other mutually reinforcing international Conventions in the field:

* The 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of an Armed Conflict, an indispensable part of International Humanitarian Law, has thus far been ratified by 133 States. The ratification of the Protocols of the Hague Convention is also very important.
* The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which focuses on legal rules on the restitution and return of cultural objects, has been ratified by 140 States.
* The 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects which deals with the private law aspects of illegal trafficking of cultural property has so far 50 contracting parties.

Bilateral agreements on the repatriation of stolen cultural property to their countries of origin is another complementary tool worth pursuing. During my tenure, Cyprus worked hard for such agreements, particularly with countries with a significant art market. These agreements help create direct channels of communication between the cultural heritage and customs authorities of the parties for the sharing of information on potential cases of stolen cultural property.

Mr. Chair,

I consider the timing of this Intersessional Workshop of particular important, because it offers an opportunity to recommit to the protection of cultural heritage and cultural rights during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Special Rapporteur Bennoune has warned about the risk of a global “cultural catastrophe”, while UNESCO has warned that many Museums that closed because of the Pandemic might never reopen. Governments should, therefore, retain adequate funding for the protection of cultural heritage sites and institutions during these challenging times.

Our obligation is to create permanent synergies in order to bequeath to future generations full access and enjoyment of their cultural rights and of cultural heritage. I am confident that this Workshop will contribute significantly to this objective.

Thank you for your attention.