

Tbilisi, 22.04.2014

To: UNESCO,  
European Commission Directorate for Education and Culture,  
Council of Europe Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape,  
World Bank,  
International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS),  
International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural  
Property (ICCROM),  
Delegation of European Commission in Georgia,  
Council of Europe Office in Tbilisi,  
Norwegian Directorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage,  
Embassies of EU member states and partner countries in Georgia

**Statement of the Georgian National Committee of ICOMOS on Recent  
Developments in Heritage Sector in Georgia**

ICOMOS Georgia appeals to the wide public, Georgian authorities and international organisations to observe and respond to the recent developments in heritage sector in Georgia, endangering ancient cultural and unique natural heritage of Georgia and their diversity, which has greatly contributed to the creation of universal human values of the mankind.

Recognition of the outstanding value of Georgia's heritage is confirmed by the large scale assistance received from international organisations and partner countries, aiming at improving governance of culture in Georgia. Outcomes of such valuable support depend on the readiness of Georgian authorities to take into consideration and apply the recommendations, analytical and research-based documents elaborated within international technical assistance programmes.

On the backdrop of the above, alarming are the recent developments and new initiatives of the government of Georgia, namely that of the Ministry of Culture and Monuments' Protection, contradicting both local and international heritage conservation principles and laws. Due to this, the situation in heritage protection sector is critical and demands immediate response.

The case of Sakdrisi-Kachagiani prehistoric mine is in the centre of interest of international scientific and academic circles, since part of the scholars believe that it is the oldest gold mine among those discovered worldwide and dates back to IV-III Mill. B.C. On 5.06.2013, the Ministry of Culture and Monuments' Protection based on the request of the private mining company RMG, had annulled the heritage status of this site, leading to a series of illegal activities on the site. Nowadays, against the background of

wide public protest, mining works have been launched and are ongoing in Sakdrisi-Kachagiani.

In 2013 Government of Georgia submitted to the Parliament of Georgia an amendment to the Law of Georgia on Cultural Heritage for its revision. This initiative aims to simplify the procedure for the revocation of heritage monument status, in order to ensure investments in new development projects.

In Tbilisi Historic District, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, implementation of the new mega project – Panorama Tbilisi – is planned. This plan contradicts regulations stipulated by the Law of Georgia on Cultural Heritage and Guidelines for Implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

The government of Georgia and the Ministry of Culture and Monuments Protection are undertaking amendments in legislation, which allow decision making in heritage sector without the involvement of professional resources and relevant expertise, justifying this by the “state strategic interests”. The government co-operates neither with professional circles and institutions, nor with public sector, while to overcome objections of the professionals working in the state institutions, the latter are drawn away from the decision making positions. Apart from the fact that these processes contradict multiple normative acts of Georgia, in general they question the heritage sector professional and political institutions; diminish functions and responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture and Monuments Protection, thus, actually, denying social, economic and state importance of the cultural values and their protection, creating chaos in the sector.

It is natural that Government of Georgia is keen to attract investments, justly considering them of vital significance for the country’s economic development. However, it is alarming that it is foreseen to achieve this on the expense of hazarding historic environment resources, turning this approach into the state development strategy of the country. Here is the main problem – the vision of the Government and its economic team, which perceives that heritage protection system hinders economic development of Georgia.

“Strategy of Social-Economic Development of Georgia” (2014-2020), clearly shows that the authorities do not recognize, even in a long-term perspective, that culture is a rich asset for the social and economic progress of the country and its citizens. Respectively, cultural heritage “hinders” country’s development and the governmental initiatives are more and more aggressive towards the heritage sector. In case this rude, rough policy does not change, apart from the current losses, it will have hazardous, irreversible results for the heritage values in a long-term perspective. Georgia’s cultural heritage is at risk!

Recent developments in cultural heritage sector in Georgia are in conflict with the essence of following international conventions and agreements that Georgia is a party of:

- Framework Convention on Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. Council of Europe. (2005);
- Convention for the Protection of Architectural Heritage of Europe, Council of Europe, (1985)
- Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, UNESCO, (1972)
- European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage, Council of Europe, (revised 1992)

Current developments also do not correspond with the declared and confirmed aspiration of the wide public of Georgia towards EU integration. A draft EU-Georgia Association Agreement, which is to be signed in July, clearly states that the Parties shall concentrate their cooperation in international fora, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, inter alia, in order to foster cultural diversity, and preserve and valorise cultural and historical heritage.

ICOMOS Georgia:

Appeals to the wide public to be on guard and to prevent underestimation of the cultural values and to stay further actively involved in the protection and development of heritage values;

Requests government of Georgia to recognize the important role of culture in social cohesion, economic growth, education and in the development of intercultural dialogue; to ensure integration of the potential and needs of heritage into national development programmes with wide public and professional participation;

Appeals to the international organisations and partner States to remind and require from the government of Georgia to fulfill its international commitments and responsibilities set forth within bilateral agreements in the culture sector; to assist the Government of Georgia to elaborate integrated economic and cultural policy for the sustainable development of the country.

ICOMOS Georgia