



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

Agenda Item 10

“Return or restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin”

Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Cyprus,

H.E. Ambassador Maria Michail

New York, 6 December 2024

Mr. President,

At the outset, allow me to commend Greece, as the main sponsor of draft resolution A/79/L.16 entitled “**Return or restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin**”, for presenting this important resolution and for conducting informal negotiations in an open and transparent manner.

My delegation welcomes the important and significant updates of this resolution. We particularly welcome the *request to Member States* to take appropriate steps to prevent and counter the illicit trade and trafficking in cultural property and other items of archaeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific, and religious importance originating from a context of armed conflict, as well as the *call on Member States* to take appropriate steps for the return or restitution to the countries of origin of collections of cultural property illegally removed before the entry into force of the 1970 Convention which are part of museums and collections.

My delegation highlights especially the crucial role of the active engagement of museums, auction houses, art dealers, art collectors, and scientific institutions in the fight against

the illicit trafficking of cultural property and the restitution of cultural assets, that is now reflected in the text.

Mr. President,

Protection of cultural property, including the return or restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin is of a significant importance not only to Cyprus, but for the international community as a whole. Cultural heritage is undeniably the clear witness of the identity of a country, mirroring the history that lies before the core of its existence.

Cyprus welcomes the unprecedented visibility the issue of return and restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin has gained. This is showcased also by the relevant commitments undertaken by the Head of States and Governments in the Pact for the Future and the Declaration on Future Generations, as well as the adoption of the MONDIACULT Declaration and the relevant commitment to enhancing the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural property.

Cyprus has a long and painful history of foreign invasions, pillaging and conquest that led to the destruction and looting of its cultural heritage of historical, archaeological and religious significance. In this regard, Cyprus is in constant efforts to trace and repatriate its cultural property, including through legal proceedings in courts around the world.

In the past five decades alone, approximately 60,000 cultural items have been illegally exported from Cyprus' occupied areas, sold globally often through auction houses. At the same time, sacred artifacts —estimated at 20,000—remain missing.

Taking into consideration our very own experience, Cyprus has a long-standing priority to contributing effectively to the efforts of the international community to combat illicit trafficking, and to ensure the repatriation of stolen cultural property.

In this regard, the “Convention on Offences Relating to Cultural Property”, also known as the “Nicosia Convention”, was adopted during Cyprus Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in May 2017. The said Convention constitutes the first ever international legal text incorporating a criminal code for perpetrators who destroy,

steel or trade cultural heritage treasures. Key characteristic includes the fact that the burden of proof lies with the buyer or possessor of the artifact.

Nicosia Convention has entered into force on 1st April 2022, and is open for signature and accession by members and non-members of the Council of Europe. Our aim is to make this new instrument truly universal. Therefore, we invite all UN Member States to consider acceding.

Cyprus is proud to be the penholder of the triennium Human Rights Council Resolution entitled "*Cultural Rights and the Protection of Cultural Heritage*", referenced also in the resolution before us today. Cyprus will introduce, again, the HRC Resolution this coming February. Furthermore, as a newly elected member of HRC for 2025-2027, cultural rights are a top priority of Cyprus' membership.

Last but not least, Cyprus as co-chair of the Group of Friends for the Protection of Cultural Heritage along with Italy, intends to revive the Group of Friends in the very near future, so to bring the protection of cultural heritage at the heart of the UN system.

Mr. President,

To conclude, my delegation is convinced that the unanimous adoption and full implementation of the draft resolution before us will further enhance our cooperation and collective efforts for the protection of our common global cultural heritage.

I thank you.