

**Additional information regarding**

**Cultural Rights and Sustainable Development**

* **Report regarding the provision of a place of religious worship in Paphos for the needs of Muslims during the celebration of Ramadan (May 2018)**

The Commissioner, under her mandates as Equality Body and NHRI, launched an inquiry into a complaint submitted in May 2018 by the “Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process” (RTCYPP) Office regarding the issue that arose in connection with the finding of a place of worship for the Muslim community in Paphos, in view of the beginning of the celebration of Ramadan on 15 May 2018.

According to the complaint, the competent services decided in October 2017 to terminate the operation of a mosque in Kato Paphos, while the efforts subsequently made by both the Muslim community and the RTCYPP to find another place for the worship needs of the Muslims in Paphos (approximately1500 members) were to no avail.

The Report made extensive reference to the national and international institutional framework that protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Reference was also made to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) (Witnesses and Others v. Turkey), which states that any failure to provide a suitable place for the manifestation of religious freedom (even a simple space which is not necessarily a space properly designed as a place of worship), creates a direct intervention in the right to religious freedom. (Article 9 of the European Conventions on Human Rights (ECHR) - right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion).

In her Report, the Commissioner stressed that the issue needed to be addressed immediately and that the competent authorities needed to take effective measures to respond to the religious and worship needs of the Muslims of Paphos - even in a place that could be used temporarily as a place of worship.

Consequently, she urged the competent authorities to proceed with all the necessary actions / arrangements to find, even as a temporary solution, a suitable place of worship for the Muslim community during Ramadan.

After the relevant Report was submitted and based on the recommendations included therein, actions/arrangements were made so that the Mosque in Kato Paphos can be used, even as a temporary solution, as a place of worship by the Muslim Community of Paphos during the last Ramadan (from 15 May to 14 June 2018).

* **Own Initiative Report regarding accessibility of persons with disabilities to places where theatrical performances are conducted (May 2019)**

After the submission of complaints regarding the inadequate accessibility of specific places in which theatrical performances are conducted, which are managed by the Cyprus Theater Organization (THOC), the Ombudsman, within the context of her jurisdictions as Equality Body and Independent Mechanism for the Promotion, Protection and Monitoring of the UN Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities, proceeded self-proclaimed, to the investigation of the broader issue of accessibility of persons with disabilities to places where theatrical performances are conducted. For establishing the level of accessibility of the said places by persons with disabilities and, in particular, whether an adequate chain of accessibility is secured in them, from the parking space up to the place where the performances/events are conducted, as well as whether within the said places, the persons with disabilities can watch comfortably and safely watch the performances/events which are conducted, the opinions of the institutions which manage them were asked, and on-site visits were conducted.

From the on-site visits which were conducted in places and installations where theatrical performances are conducted all over Cyprus, it was established that in most of the cases, the chain of access to the said places is directed exclusively and is focused to the needs of persons with disabilities in mobility and that adjustments are absent, which would broaden the accessibility to persons with disabilities beyond mobility.

The importance of accessibility of persons with disabilities to the social, economic and cultural environment is pointed out in article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, on the basis of which the States are obliged to take appropriate steps which will secure the accessibility of persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others, to installations and services which are open or provided to the public. The issue of accessibility is, according to the Convention, directly connected to universal designing of products, environments, programmes and services, which could be used by everybody.

Also according to the Convention, the States have to take appropriate steps, to secure that persons with disabilities have access to cultural material, movies, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible forms, as well as to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, cinemas etc.

In view of the above, suggestions were submitted both for the amendment of the above Regulations, since due to the fact that they are not retrospective, they cannot be applied to existing inaccessible developments, and also to the services/ authorities/institutions which own or manage places in which theatrical performances are conducted, to safeguard:

* An unhindered chain of access from the parking place up to the said places for all persons with disabilities, regardless of their disability.
* The existence of a satisfactory number of parking spaces for persons with disabilities at a short distance from the entrances of the said places.
* The existence of a satisfactory number of seats for persons with disabilities, as well as for their escorts, within these said places.
* That the said seats are not situated only in a specific spot of the said places, but wherever and whenever it is technically feasible, at different spots and levels.
* That at any point in time, access of the persons with disability to the emergency exits is feasible.
* That both outside and inside their installations, there will be an adequate and satisfactory marking in appropriate forms, for facilitating the orientation and movement of all persons with disabilities, regardless of their disability.
* That the performances in the places that they own and/or manage, in which theatrical performances are conducted, will become fully accessible to persons with disabilities with visual and hearing impairment.
* The provision of clear instructions to all their staff regarding the method of handling persons with disabilities.

Moreover, a suggestion was made that the managers of theatrical performances, in consultation with the representative organizations of persons with disabilities, amongst other things, stop the practice of demanding the in advance informing by persons with disabilities, of their wish to watch their performances and to ensure that at any point in time, even at a time shortly before the beginning of their performances, there is a number of seats for persons with disabilities, available within the theatres, in case the said persons arrive late at the place of the performance, as well as that the benefit which the European Disability Card offers to persons with disabilities, for free entrance to performances of the Cyprus Theater Organization (THOC) is not cancelled.

With regard especially to the Amphitheatre of the School for the Blind (Makarios III), which is managed by THOC, the suggestions to THOC were that, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth and in consultation with the representative organizations of persons with disabilities, they re-examine ways of making seats for persons with disabilities, at another place in the amphitheatre, other than the corridor at the top of the stands and that they proceed with the necessary arrangements so that watching the performances from the said corridor is done in comfort and safety.

Finally, regarding the remaining theatres/places in which theatrical performances are conducted, individual suggestions were made (α) to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth to examine ways, in consultation with the Ministry of Defence, so that the guard post which is located in front of the Pallas Cinema does not obstruct the safe use of the pavement which leads to the theatre and (b) to CyBC to expedite the construction of lavatories for persons with disabilities in its mini-theatre, as well as to the Municipality of Lakatamia, in its Municipal Amphitheatre.

After the submission of the relevant Report of the Ombudsman, the Cyprus Theater Organization (THOC):

* Proceeded with representations to its Studier to implement, where possible, the suggestions which were included in the Report and concerned the Amphitheatre of the School for the Blind (Makarios III).
* Has included in its programming, the over-titling in Greek, of all the productions of the Central and of the New Stage, as well as of Stage 018 and of «Apothikes» Theatre, with the frequency of two over-titled performances per month for each production (information about the said performances are uploaded on the webpage of THOC).
* For the year 2020, over-titles in Greek are programmed both for the Central and for the New Stage as well as for the Children’s Stage of THOC.
* Continues the Operation of «Δείτε μας Αλλιώς» [«See us Otherwise»] which offers the possibility to persons with visual disability to watch the performances of THOC on specific dates.
* **Information campaign and a series of actions on the rights of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers (June-July 2019)**

The Commissioner, in the framework of her responsibilities as the National Independent Authority for Human Rights and Equality Authority and Anti-Discrimination Body, launched a campaign on the rights of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers.

One of the aims of the campaign was to give emphasis on women who are struggling, every refugee mother, every domestic worker, every woman, victim of torture or inhumane treatment of any kind, who, in addition to the gender violence which they are subject to, are at the same time responsible for waging a struggle for the social integration of themselves and their families in the host country.

As part of the campaign, the Commissioner and Officers of her Office carried out visits to the Cyprus Association of Recognised Refugees “New Genesis Centre” in Nicosia and the Reception and Accommodation Centre for Political Asylum Seekers in Kofinou.

During their visit at the Association, the Commissioner and the Officers of the Office had the opportunity to talk to the attendees and listen to the experiences and problems they are facing. They were given the assurance that our Office will be standing by their side, providing assistance at all times to resolve any issues that concern them.

During the visit to the Reception and Accommodation Centre for Asylum Seekers in Kofinou, the Director of the Centre guided the Commissioner and the Officers of her Office in the facilities of the Centre. He also informed them about the corrective actions and projects that had been and/or would be implemented to improve the daily life of the occupants at the Centre, as well as about the problems and challenges they are faced with.

The above were recorded by the Officers of our Office, and after highlighting the apparent improvement of the facilities and living conditions in the Centre as well as the elimination of pathogens observed in the past, the Commissioner assured the Director of the Centre that, within the framework of her responsibilities as the National Independent Authority for Human Rights, Officers of her Office will remain in open communication with him to ensure that all the necessary actions and representations to all services involved to address and resolve the identified problems, are made the soonest possible.

Additionally, the Commissioner, in collaboration with the NGO “AWARE” campaign, organised on 9 July 2019 in Nicosia the event entitled “Refugee woman, immigrant woman in Cyprus”.

During the event, the Commissioner, as well as a representative of the “Aware” campaign and the Protection Officer of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Cyprus, addressed speeches. Also, refugee and immigrant women living in Cyprus shared their experiences with the public, in relation to the difficulties of their journey to an unknown country away from their families and with an uncertain ending, and their optimism and hopes for a prosperous future in Cyprus, despite the problems and challenges faced with in their effort to become fully integrated into the Cypriot society and affairs.

The attendees had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the arts, civilisation and culture of the refugees and immigrants, through events presented during the event. With their song, narratives and dances, they travelled the audience to their homeland and introduced them to their culture and cultural peculiarities.

The event was followed by a short reception accompanied by music.

The event was supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Cyprus Refugee Council, the Mediterranean Institute for Gender Research and the Association of Recognised Refugees.

Following the event and as part of the information and awareness campaign, a series of actions were carried out to assist the struggle of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers to overcome the problems they are faced with in building a dignified life and fully integrating into the Cypriot society.

More specifically, a series of lectures, seminars and other activities were held to further inform people about the problems and difficulties faced by refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, aiming at cultivating a culture of respect and solidarity towards third-country countries, as well as a series of contacts and consultations with authorities/bodies, NGOs and the representative organisations of our fellow men, in order to finally achieve their smooth integration into the Cypriot society and remove the problems they are daily faced with.

* **Own Initiative Intervention regarding the respect of religious freedom and cultural heritage (April 2021)**

In April 2021, and in light of the vandalism of a mosque in Episkopi village that occurred on the night of March 24, 2021, the Commissioner, in the framework of her competences an Equality Body and a NHRI submitted an Own Initiative Intervention in relation to safeguarding the freedom of religion.

Specifically, according to reports in daily press, on the night of March 24, 2021, unknown individuals wrote threatening slogans towards people of Turkish origin on the front of the mosque and painted national symbols.

In the Intervention was noted that similarly, other such actions saw the light of day recently, such as, the party that took place at the only Armenian Monastery in Cyprus (Sourp Magar Monastery) located in Pentadaktylos mountain on March 20, 2021, while in the past, other acts of desecration of churches (and monasteries) or their misuse. Examples of such actions are the theft of doors of the restored monastery of St. Panteleimon in Myrtos and the organization of a bazaar inside the church of Archangel Michael in Lekoniko, in December 2020.

Although the last reported incidents did not take place in areas under the effective control exercise by of the Republic, they, nevertheless, took place in the territory of the Republic of Cyprus in places of worship, which are also historical monuments of Cyprus and part of our cultural heritage.

The purpose of the Intervention was to remind and underline the need to respect the right of religious freedom which includes ensuring and supporting the unobstructed expression of all religious beliefs, in the context of a modern democratic society and in particular in the Republic of Cyprus in the light of the Constitution (Articles 1-5) which explicitly refers to both communities and religious groups.

The Commissioner firstly expressed her concerns in relation to the vandalism of both the mosque in Episkopi but also in respect to any act of vandalism and insult of any place of worship, such as the party at the Armenian Monastery in Cyprus (Sourp Magar Monastery) in Pentadaktylos mountain, the theft of the doors of the restored monastery of Agios Panteleimon in Myrtos, and the organization of a bazaar inside the church of the Archangel Michael in Lekoniko, in December 2020, which are, as she noted, undoubtedly reprehensible.

Additionally, religious freedom imposes the cultivation and consolidation of the values of mutual respect towards every religion, tradition and cultural heritage of person or group of persons, people or community.

In this regard, the Commissioner noted that further to the existing inclusive legal framework for the protection of human rights, it is necessary to continue and intensify actions and policies, aimed at promoting and substantially comprehensing the above principles and values of mutual respect for the protection of individual rights and society at large, from acts eligible to cultivate hatred.

The Commissioner concluded that the message that, in any case, should be given by the State, is zero tolerance for such actions that violate human rights and disrupt the harmonious coexistence of people of different nationalities, ethnicities, religions and traditions, but also the indisputable necessity for measures aiming to achieve the respect cultural heritage in all directions.

* **Own Initiative Intervention regarding the right to substantial safeguard of the cultural heritage and the need for cultivating a culture of respect for it (December 2021)**

In December 2021, an Own Initiative Intervention was submitted, in the framework of the competences of the Commissioner as an Equality Body and a NHRI, on the occasion of an arson attack on the Buyuk Mosque in Larnaca. Even though from the police investigation was revealed that it was an unfortunate incident (personal and not racist motives of the arsonist), however, given the extent of the issue, it was deemed appropriate and necessary to refer again to the issue of actions aimed at places of worship of any religion and monuments of the cultural heritage of the place.

As it was noted, on the occasion of this incident, there is a need to further cultivate a culture of respect for places of worship of any religion, which are part of the domestic cultural heritage and need to be respected by every resident of the place.

The basic principles governing the right to religious freedom and the obligation to ensure the smooth expression of all religious beliefs, all persons residing in a State within a modern democratic society, where different religions may coexist with each other, were also reminded. reflection the respect of the place of worship. The need to respect and preserve the cultural environment and the preservation of the historical memory of the place, both for the sake of the present generation and the future ones, was also reminded.

As it was also noted, actions and policies should be continued and intensified to promote and effectively consolidate the above principles and values and protect society at large from aggressive acts as well as disseminate knowledge of cultural heritage to all without exception. residing in the territory of the Republic of Cyprus.