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Cypriot MEP Mavrides to Orthodoxia News Agency: Turks engaging in 'cultural genocide' in occupied areas of Cyprus



Cypriot European Parliament deputy Costas Mavrides spoke to the Orthodoxia News Agency this week regarding what experts are calling a “cultural genocide” in the illegally Turkish-occupied area of the eastern Mediterranean island republic.

Mavrides pointed to a systemic campaign to eradicate **Christian** pilgrimage sites and churches in the occupied areas, in tandem with the building of huge mosques, all funded by the occupying power, **Turkey**.

The figures he cites are shocking.

Of the roughly 600 **Orthodox** churches in the occupied areas of **Cyprus**, the vast majority have been destroyed. Other **Christian** houses of worship are used as stables or face daily desecration. Just as insolent, 24 **Greek Orthodox cathedrals** have been converted into mosques by the occupying regime.

According to Mavrides, *"...there's 100 percent European funding available to Turkish Cypriot companies for the maintenance, construction and supervision of such projects. However, the occupation regime usually rejects such projects... It has only approved of the preservation of three or four churches, which it then uses as a source of revenue, as well as propaganda, to order to claim that it respects the churches."*

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Recently you made another representation to the European Commission, condemning the systematic destruction of churches by Turkey in the Occupied Territories, noting particularly the case of Saint Marina's in the occupied village of Diorios in the Cyrenaica region. Tell us something about this representation.

The systematic destruction of churches on lands occupied by Turkey in Cyprus is an organized policy on the part of Turkey which it imposed in 1974, after the Turkish invasion, and has been implementing ever since. Of the roughly 600 Orthodox churches and monuments in the Occupied Territories, most of the sites and building have already been razed or destroyed, leaving only their ruins. Besides, dozens of other churches are completely abandoned and are bordering on collapse. After the accession of Cyprus to the European Union in 2004, an Inter-Community Programme was launched, funded by the EU, which supports the preservation of religious and cultural monuments. Turkey agreed to this because funds were thus channelled into the Turkish Cypriot community but at the same time, and through the occupying regime, Turkey created obstacles to the preservation and conservation of churches. These obstacles remain unsurmountable to this day. One such church which is close to collapse, with trees growing through the walls, with its interior full of filth and sacrilege, is that of Saint Marina, in the village of Diorios, located in the Turkish-held region of Crenaica, which is where I come from, actually. This church was built in 1850 and, until 1974, was the centre of religious

and social life in the village, being maintained in excellent condition.

As the Cypriote State, we have made distressing compromises in that hope that at least a few of these churches can be saved. There's 100% funding from Europe paid to Turkish companies for the preservation, construction and hiring of staff for these projects. But the authorities in the Occupied Territories generally turn down such projects. They agreed to the preservation of 3-4 churches which are used as a source of income (museums with an entry fee) and they promote these as propaganda indicating their supposed respect for churches.

An Office of the European Commission functions in the occupied part of Cyprus and its aim, among other things, is to supervise the European funds for these matters. Alas, the churches are falling down, they're often used as stables for animals or suffer other sacrilege, but there's apathy and tolerance of Turkey's criminal policy on Cypriote soil. Through my representation, I have informed the European Commission in Brussels about the church which is collapsing and have asked that it intervene to ensure its survival. I indirectly blame the European Commission for its indulgent attitude and for the lack of action on the part of its Office in the Occupied Territories, which has been the case for years now.

During the time you've been in the European Parliament, you've also undertaken other, similar initiatives. Could you tell us about some of them and the response they've met with?

This is my 6th year in the European Parliament (my second term) and my concern for the Christian Orthodox monuments and churches in the Occupied Territories and for Christian sites in general has been my priority from the beginning. With interventions in the plenary sessions of the European Parliament, letters to institutional organs of the EU, written petitions co-signed by EMP colleagues and with the organization of conferences with the European parliament, amendments to various studies and pieces of legislation within the EU. In all the above, I have had a stalwart collaborator, the Representation Office of the Church of Cyprus to the European Institutions (in Brussels), in the person of Bishop Porfyrios. One of the most important conferences within the European Parliament took place in 2018, with official speakers and an exhibition of photographs of the collapsing ecclesiastical monuments in the Occupied Territories. Actually, at that conference I also acted as host to 25 members of the clergy who had links to the churches in the Occupied Territories. It was something positive and unheard of: because of the

conference, the European Parliament was inundated with Orthodox bishops and priests. The attendance on the part of my fellow EMPs and EU officials was impressive, as was the interest they displayed.

From the information at your disposal what's the situation in the Occupied Territories at this moment, particularly regarding the historic pilgrimage sites and the cultural monuments?

It's tragic. The cultural genocide and the razing of Christian monuments has, in large part, been accomplished at the cost of most of the total of about 600 religious sites of worship in the Occupied Territories of Cyprus. Since Erdogan came to power in Turkey, we've entered a second phase of Turkish policy. Instead of the systematic devastation and uprooting of the Christian features of the Occupied Territories, we now have their systematic Islamification. This includes funding from Turkey for the construction of new mosques (87) and minarets, which are sometimes enormous in size, entirely disproportionate to the size of the Turkish Cypriot community both in terms of size and economic strength. 24 Greek Orthodox churches have been made into mosques and are used as such by the Muslims through force of arms. In the margins, there are three churches in the Occupied Territories (those of Saint Mamas, Barnabas the Apostle and Andrew the Apostle) which are being maintained as museums by the occupying authorities as a source of income, since you have to pay to enter these sites. At the same time and for propaganda reasons, they're presented as evidence of respect for Christian monuments.

Are you worried about the prospect of new provocations on the part of Turkey, particularly as regards the issue of Famagusta, as we head towards elections in the Occupied Territories?

The Famagusta issue is another indication that Turkey has become a rogue, criminal state which ignores every rule of International Law. In this particular instance, despite the wishes of the United Nations Security Council, which wants the region to be returned to its Greek Cypriote residents as a good will gesture, despite the verdicts of the European Courts, despite the decisions of EU in repeated votes in the European Parliament, Turkey is proceeding with a new, illegal process of colonization of the fenced-off seafront at Famagusta. I would stress that this isn't

simply about provocative acts and unilateral activities which have to do with the leadership in the Occupied Territories, but that it involves illegal expansionary actions with a view to colonization. According to the Constitution of the International Criminal Court in the Hague, this constitutes a crime against humanity. At the political level it demonstrates yet again that it's Turkey that decides and that the regime in the Occupied Territories in Cyprus carries out the orders. Given this flagrant disregard of International Law, such contempt for the resolution of the United Nations, the European Courts and the European Union, is there anybody who believes that Turkey would respect and implement an agreement for an overall solution to the Cyprus problem?

How do you see the result of the latest session of the Council of Europe regarding Greece and Cyprus? What taste did it leave your colleagues with?

The European Council summit arrived at decisions which should normally provoke a strong reaction on the part of the citizens of the EU. Following pressure from Germany in particular, the decision of the European Council was to continue with its policy of appeasement towards an Islamist/Fascist regime in Turkey which is especially dangerous and expansionist. The decision of the European Council, however, remains incomprehensible, unethical and hypocritical. More precisely, sanctions were imposed on the regime in Belarus for its high-handed approach to its own citizens within its borders. Yet the Erdogan regime, with mass disappearances, imprisonments, tortures, crack-downs and persecutions within Turkey and with openly hostile and illegitimate activities directed at member-states of the EU (Cyprus and Greece) is merely given a warning, accompanied by a 'positive agenda' as a reward, should there be a reduction in tension. This might mean a broadening in trade, as Germany and Turkey both want, through a Customs Union. Matters are even worse, if you consider that Belarus is outside the EU and doesn't pose a threat to member-states of the EU, whereas Turkey, which is officially a candidate member for accession (and receives funds as such) has invaded and occupied with its troops the lands of states both within the EU (such as Cyprus), and outside it. It enjoys a privileged framework for trade (no tariffs) within a Customs Union with the EU. The stance of the European Council- where unanimity is required- and the concomitant result, is not merely disappointing, but also indicative of the moral bankruptcy which is evident within the EU when it comes to Turkey. I am convinced that this attitude of the EU will prove to be entirely mistaken and will bring shame to the history of Europe, as was the case with the

policy of appeasement which was followed doggedly in the 1930s towards the Nazi regime in Germany. Unfortunately, when the Europeans realize their great mistake, humanity within and without Turkey will be forced to pay a greater humanitarian price to free itself from this Islamist/Fascism which is being nourished by the Neo-Ottoman expansionism of Turkey in the modern era.

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