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**TÜRKIYE’S DECISION TO TURN THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN
CHURCHES “HAGIA SOPHIA” AND “CHORA” INTO MOSQUES AND
ITS INFLUENCE TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF GREECE**

By

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The aim of this paper is to brief about Türkiye's disrespectful decision towards two emblematic religious sites of the Orthodox Christianity; the Church of 'Hagia Sophia' and the Church of the Holy Savior in 'Chora' – having characterized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as World Heritage sites – by converting them into Muslim mosques, and to analyze how this action affects the cultural security of Greece, a sub-category of a state's national security that is also related to what has been described by Joseph Nye as "soft power."

Before proceeding any further, it is important to clarify some of the terms used in the paper, starting from the term national security which can be defined as "the protection of a state's territorial integrity, sovereignty, overall functioning, and its citizens from any threat/risk." Depending on whether the threat/risk is external or domestic, national security is divided respectively into two main categories, the external and the internal security. Furthermore, according to the policy field that is affected or the origin/nature of the threat/risk it is further divided to several sub-categories such as military security, economic security, energy security, food security, environmental security, health security, maritime security, cybersecurity, security of critical infrastructure, etc.

As dictated by the aforementioned definition, cultural security is the protection against any threat/risk that endangers a state's culture, which according to Britannica includes "[...] language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements." It must also be stressed that cultural security encompasses both the physical protection of a state's culture (the protection of artifacts against harsh environmental conditions, illegal trafficking, etc.) and the preservation of a state's cultural identity (meaning its customs, traditions, cuisine, etc.) which inter alia is responsible for maintaining a state's social cohesion – the interdependence/solidarity among its citizens – which is vital for the proper functioning of the state and the citizens' well-being.

As far as the concept of "soft power" is concerned, it is a term introduced by the American scholar Joseph Nye to describe a state or non-state actor's ability to influence the behavior of another actor due the special characteristics (such as the historical background, the political system, the culture, the endorsed values and ideals, etc.) of the first actor, instead of the use of military and/or economic (mainly in the form of sanctions) force

which compose the opposite concept of “*hard power*.” Thus, soft and hard power constitute the state’s national power which – through the DIME instruments (Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economy) – provides to the state the ability to ensure its national interests, usually identified in its National Security Strategy (NSS) and/or other relevant official documents.



Picture 1: The Justinian Church of Hagia Sophia (Church of the Holy/Divine Wisdom)
(Photo Source: <https://whc.unesco.org>)

Recognizing the importance of the preservation of different cultures – not only in national level but for mankind as well - UNESCO proceeded on November 16th, 1972 in the adoption of the “*Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*,” including in article 1 all monuments, groups of buildings and sites of outstanding universal value (from the historical, artistic, scientific, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological perspective) as cultural heritage. Moreover, article 4 of the Convention defined that each state party to the Convention is obliged to ensure the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the aforementioned cultural heritage, while by article 8 it was established the World Heritage Committee, an Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the Cultural and Natural

Heritage of Outstanding Universal Value.

In addition to that, UNESCO – in order to ensure the protection of the numerous sites of World Heritage – has established the “*World Heritage List*” which includes worldwide sites of outstanding universal value that meet ten specific selection criteria. The “*World Heritage List*” includes the ‘*Historic Areas of Istanbul*’ – areas of the world famous former capital of the Byzantine Empire that was known *Constantinople* – among which are “*Hagia Sophia*” (the Justinian Church designed in 532-537 AD by Anthemios of Tralles and Isidoros of Miletus) and the Church of the Holy Saviour of “*Chora*” containing 14th and 15th centuries mosaics and paintings.

Despite the fact that Türkiye is a party to the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage since March 16th, 1983 and that “*Hagia Sophia*” is included in the World Heritage List, the Turkish authorities decided on July 10th, 2020 to change its 1934-established-status of museum to a Muslim mosque. It must also be stressed that in 1453 the Ottoman Turks (after the conquest of the Constantinople) had turned “*Hagia Sophia*” to a mosque after almost 1,000 years of its functioning as an Orthodox Christian cathedral. The 2020 decision of the Turkish authorities was highly criticized by UNESCO, issuing a statement the same day noting that:

“The Director-General of UNESCO deeply regrets the decision of the Turkish authorities, made without prior discussion, to change the status of Hagia Sophia. [...] This decision announced today raises the issue of the impact of this change of status on the property’s universal value. States have an obligation to ensure that modifications do not affect the Outstanding Universal Value of inscribed sites on their territories. UNESCO must be given prior notice of any such modifications, which, if necessary, are then examined by the World Heritage Committee.”

Defying the obligations of the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and UNESCO’s aforementioned statement, the Turkish authorities proceeded in a similar action on *August 21th, 2020*, this time turning the Church of the Holy Saviour of ‘*Chora*’ into a Muslim mosque, resulting in the issuance of the

‘210EX/39’ decision of UNESCO, which inter alia stated that the Organization:

“Calls on Turkey, under its capacity as a contracting party to the 1972 UNESCO Convention to respect its relevant obligations under the Convention and to implement the Convention’s respective Guidelines, bearing in mind that the inscription (1985) on the World Heritage List of the Hagia Sophia and the Chora Museum, as parts of the property “Historic Areas of Istanbul”, was made at the request of Turkey.”



Picture 2: The Church of the Holy Savior in Chora

(Photo Source: <https://orthodoxtimes.com>)

Nevertheless, on *May 6th*, 2024 Türkiye – almost four year after the respective UNESCO decision – turned the Church of the Holy Saviour of ‘Chora’ into a Muslim mosque. At this point it must be stressed that the Greek Government reacted firmly in both cases, stating in the case of “Hagia Sophia” through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs that:

“[...] This alteration constitutes a violation of Turkey’s obligations under the 1972 UNESCO Convention and casts a heavy

shadow on its image. [...] At a time when convergence and unifying steps are needed, moves that foment religious and cultural divisions and widen rather than bridge rifts do not contribute to understanding and rapprochement between peoples.”

While in the case of the Church of the Holy Saviour of ‘Chora’ the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following statement:

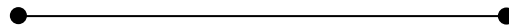
“The Turkish authorities’ decision to begin the operation of the Monastery of Chora as a Muslim mosque constitutes a provocation for the international community as it distorts and affects its character as a UNESCO World Heritage Site belonging to humanity. The maintenance of monuments’ universal character and compliance with international standards for the protection of religious and cultural heritage is a clear international obligation binding on all States.”

As far as the *Ecumenical Patriarchate* is concerned, its leadership strongly condemned both actions reiterating that both “*Hagia Sophia*” and “*Chora Church*” have a long tradition of being a source of inspiration and enlightenment for millions of people all over the world regardless of their religion, also calling upon international organizations and Governments of the world to compel the Turkish Government to reverse the conversion of “*Hagia Sophia*” and “*Chora Church*” to Muslim mosques and show the minimum respect their historical background by reestablishing their status. The most recent statement regarding “*Chora Church*” stated inter alia that:

“[...] This is yet another contemptuous act against religious freedom perpetrated by the government of Turkey; the Archons strongly condemn this action. [...] This ill-advised decision once again makes a mockery of the Turkish government’s commitment to religious tolerance and religious freedom.[...] The Turkish government’s appropriation of both as the property of one faith group not only constitutes yet another sign of that government’s contempt for Turkey’s rich Orthodox Christian heritage, but further imperils the religious freedom of the Ecumenical

Patriarchate and the remaining Christians of that land [...].”

To conclude, it needs to be understood that “religious diplomacy” is not only a significant asset of the Greek foreign policy, but a powerful pillar of the country’s “soft diplomacy”, strengthening the national interests worldwide, as Greece – in which the vast majority of its citizens are Orthodox Christians and according to the state’s Constitution “*The prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ*” – maintains strong ties with all Orthodox Patriarchates around the world and monitors the worldwide protection of the Christian communities, shrines and monuments. That said and taking this into consideration that the Orthodox Church had a critical role in the launch of the Greek revolution in the 19th century that led to its independence and the establishment of the state of Greece, the preservation of the Greek Orthodox Christian tradition worldwide is of high importance for the national security of Greece as it not only reflects the universal values that unite the Greeks in the homeland and abroad, but it is also promotes the national interests of the country worldwide.



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