



WORLD HERITAGE WATCH

To:

The Prime Minister of Albania
Mr. Edi Rama
Dëshmorët e Kombit Bvd. 7
1010 Tirana
ALBANIA

via email

Open Letter

Berlin, 21 March 2021

Dear Prime Minister Rama,

with greatest concern we have heard that construction works have started in Gjirokastra for a new "Bypass Road" supposedly to facilitate motorized traffic from the Drino Valley to the Quarters of Dunavat and Manalat and possibly also Partizani and Palorto.

We address you as global citizens. Having been inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2005, Gjirokastra has become a heritage of humankind as a whole, implying that Albania has a responsibility to protect and safeguard Gjirokastra's Outstanding Universal Value not only for its own citizens but for everyone on the planet.

We also address you because all of us have a personal relationship and precious memories of Gjirokastra. We have visited Gjirokastra many times, some of us have lived there or have established businesses there; all of us have devoted much time, thought and resources to support the city, its people and its cultural heritage.

Should this road not be stopped we are afraid that it will be a catastrophe not only for Gjirokastra but also for the international recognition of Albania as a whole. For many years, Albania has praised itself of its cultural heritage (and rightly so), and has promoted cultural tourism. All this will be put in jeopardy through a single act of barbarism which we felt would have been unthinkable ever since 1991.

- The Bypass Road will destroy some of the most authentic and undisturbed parts of Gjirokastra, the Çfakë Valley, beyond recognition.
- Many highly important cultural monuments, among them traditional vernacular houses of 1st Category, historic bridges, archeological remains and paved trails which give the valley its

where the ensemble of houses, urban gardens, trails, staircases and bridges, all embedded in the natural valley of the Zerzebili Stream, with the historic "Ali Pasha Gate" overhead, can be seen in such a high degree of authenticity and integrity.

- No Environmental Impact Assessment and no Heritage Impact Assessment of the Project have been published - should they have been carried out -, as required by law.
- The plans of the project have not been laid out in public for comment as required by law.
- The purpose which this road is supposed to serve has not been explained to the public through facts and figures. Neither present flows nor future needs of motorized traffic have been studied. Therefore, there is no reliable basis to show that there is a need for this road, and it is quite unclear whether it will serve any purpose, whatever it may be.
- The Bypass Road is being built without a comprehensive mobility plan for the historic town of Gjirokastra. A mobility plan has repeatedly been requested by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee but the Government of Albania has failed to submit this plan to this day.
- The project, which clearly may have a serious impact on the Outstanding Universal Value, has not been submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as it should have been under Art. 172 of the Operational Guidelines to the World Heritage Convention - again in clear breach of international law.

Over many years, the authenticity and integrity of Gjirokastra's unique urban character has suffered dramatically - mainly through uncontrolled construction and degradation -, to the extent that in 2012 a UNESCO Reactive Monitoring Mission was dispatched to the town with a specific task of determining whether it should be inscribed in the List of World Heritage in Danger. At that point in time, the Mission advised not to take this step but to give Gjirokastra another chance. Now, if the Bypass Road should be built, and in view of a history of non-compliance with the World Heritage Convention, this move - and the subsequent deletion from the World Heritage List - will seem inevitable.

This will be a blow to all the efforts made by the international community over decades to help Albania protect Gjirokastra's priceless cultural heritage. But most of all it will utterly frustrate the people of Gjirokastra for whom the UNESCO status is an insurance policy for the uncountable resources they have invested in its cultural tourism development.

While we fully recognize that Albania has become a reliable member of the international community in other fields, we urge you to also honor your commitments and obligations in the field of cultural heritage.

For hundreds of years, generations of Albanians have tried to safeguard the Historic Town of Gjirokastra for their children and grandchildren. We cannot accept the idea that this should come to an end under your government, and we are fully convinced that the Albanian people would not agree with the Bypass Road Project should they be fully informed about its implications, and the circumstances of its realization.

Please pause for a moment, consider the full range of consequences of this fatal project and stop it before it is too late. With the support of the ingenuity and capability of your fellow Albanians, and the resources of the international community, Gjirokastra can be modernized without destroying its cultural heritage. For this you will have our active, full and unequivocal support.

Yours Sincerely

St. Doempke

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