



January 5, 2021

To:

U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Albania Yuri Kim
U.S. Embassy Tirana
Rruga Stavro Vinjau, 14
Tirana, Albania

Subject: Teatri Kombëtar / National Theater of Albania

Your Excellency, Madam Ambassador,

We are reaching out today in support of the letter sent to you by the Alliance for the Protection of the National Theatre of Albania (AMT) on May 15, 2020, “Subject: Call for Support: The National Theater under the imminent threat of being demolished.”

We believe that this matter is of relevance not only to global historic heritage and the shared international responsibility to protect it, but as we will explain below, also to the U.S. and to the principles of U.S. policy. We are hoping that you will lend your weight to an effort to find a win-win outcome in this currently unfortunate situation.

We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, based in Virginia, USA. Our mission is to promote, protect, and preserve cultural heritage especially in conflict and post-conflict contexts. On August 11, 2020 we included the Teatri Kombëtar/National Theater of Albania on our “Wall of Shame” (<https://www.archinternational.org/projects/wall-of-shame/>), an initiative that aims to raise awareness around heritage in danger around the world by informing the public about civil society groups and their work in their communities to save local sites of importance.

We have carefully reviewed the matter around the National Theater and share the view of the civil society activists – members of the AMT – who nominated the Theater for inclusion on our website.

The now demolished theater was a valuable and meaningful site. The groups comprising the AMT, together with many dedicated local individuals, have tried very hard since February 2018 to find a solution concerning their cherished and valued landmark, which until this May stood in the center of the country’s capital.

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In our conversations with local concerned academics, civil society representatives, journalists and other involved individuals, we came to understand how much resonance, value and meaning this building holds for the citizens of Albania. It is a symbol of hardships endured, of transitions over time, of important relationships with other countries and of iconic turning points in the history of the city and the country. It was a gathering place and a location where critical moments of the country's story unfolded. With it, and in it, history was made. It is an integral part of the country's cultural and national identity.

Here are some facts that illustrate the building's special status for those who fought for its survival and are now fighting for its reconstruction:

- The building was completed in 1940, when Albania was annexed by Italy. Built by Italian and Albanian architects in a style common during the Italian fascist era "il Ventennio," the complex was named "The Italian-Albanian Circle Skanderbeg."
- The complex is one of the first rationalist buildings in all of Albania, following a period of neoclassical construction.
- The building was designed for film screenings, theatrical performances, concerts but it also hosted important political events, including those of the heads of state, regardless of the political regime.
- Movies featuring world-famous actors and actresses have been shown at the National Theater, including Greta Garbo, Laurence Olivier, and Anna Magnani in the 1940s when the hall was used as a movie theater, and classical music concerts (Vivaldi, Schumann, Chopin) and operas (Verdi, Rossini) were held there.
- After the Second World War, in November 1944, the communist partisans took power and immediately launched arrests and shootings of public figures who were perceived as having collaborated with the occupier or who had not aided the Anti-Fascist National Liberation Movement. The Special Trial was held at the National Theater by the new communist regime against those labeled "enemies of the people" and "war criminals". It holds those memories.

The goal of rescuing this site has gathered notable supporters, even including the President of the Republic of Albania.



Additional supporters include:

- The Union of Architects and Urban Planners of Albania (AUA)
- Europa Nostra, perhaps the most prestigious and respected Heritage Organization in Europe
- The Volkstheater, Vienna, Austria
- The National Theater of the Kosovo Union of Artists and Workers
- Claudio Rocca, Director “Academia di Belle Arte di Firenze”
- Elfriede Jelinek, holder of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Austria
- Tiago Rodriguez, Artistic Director, National Theater of Portugal
- Journalists Jack Parrock, Euronews, Belgium, Daniel McLaughlin, Irish Times, Ireland, Nora Sefa, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Germany

For your reference, here are some of the recent developments:

1. The demolition by the Municipality of Tirana of Teatri Kombëtar/National Theater on May 17, 2020 has been condemned internationally. This includes The European Union, through Commissioner for Culture Mariya Gabriel, as well as the organization Europa Nostra.
2. The President of the Republic of Albania has condemned the rushed overnight “under cover of darkness” demolition.
3. On March 24, 2020 the historic building was included as one of Europa Nostra’s 2020 “7 Most Endangered Heritage Sites.”
4. Two pending legal cases are underway, directed by the Constitutional Court of Albania, directly brought forward by the Institution of the President of Albania, with regard to the Special Law, as well as the Decision of the Council of Ministers that transfers the property rights of the Theater to the Municipality of Tirana. There are other ongoing legal investigations addressed to the Mayor of Tirana, Mr. Erion Veliaj, the Prosecutor’s Office of Tirana, and the Ombudsman of Albania, among others.
5. The Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK) has stated that they are investigating the issues brought before it, but so far there has not been any progress. We are informed that the SPAK received and perhaps still receives funding from the U.S. government. If this is correct, its responsible functioning is relevant to the U.S. taxpayers. If they are not dealing with these cases, SPAK risks appearing complicit in failing to address complaints of illegal actions that brought about the destruction of the historic theater and its transfer to a non-transparent new use.



6. We have been informed that the government plans to include the project for the construction of the new National Theater in its list of reconstruction projects subsidized by funds allocated for buildings affected by a recent earthquake, although the act of demolition was not in any way linked to the earthquake. We are not in a position to independently verify this, but it would represent an act of corruption if true and should be investigated by SPAK and by the administrators of the earthquake funding.

To summarize: The process of the destruction of the old and the construction of the new theater lacks transparency and has been contested in particular for the extraordinarily high funds that are projected for these tenders. Further, no process has been established to consult with civil society or hear the views of independent experts.

We are concerned that the ongoing civil society advocacy around saving a people's heritage, identity, and history is being ignored.

It is our experience from our international work with comparable issues, that a compromise can often be found. Change and development can't and shouldn't be halted, but neither should heritage be thoughtlessly destroyed. Very often, if these two sides of the coin commit to a constructive conversation, a solution emerges that both sides find acceptable. We regret that such a conversation does not seem to have taken place as of yet in regard to the National Theater.

Here is where we believe you might be able to play a very valuable role – by encouraging a search for a constructive compromise. We also believe the Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK) must fulfill its role and ensure that the government and the municipality pause the planned tender for the construction of a new theater until a full investigation is completed.

We were encouraged to read the following official statement, that:

“[...] [T]he United States will remain a steadfast partner to support the SPAK and all those who seek to end impunity and bring justice to the Albanian people” (Press Release, U.S. Embassy, Tirana, Albania, Dec. 19, 2019)

We appeal to you to ensure that this promise is indeed fulfilled.

Sincerely,

Dr. Cheryl Benard, President, ARCH International