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**PETITION REQUESTING IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE TO PREVENT  
THE DESTRUCTION OF OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUES OF THE  
VILNIUS HISTORIC CENTRE – A PROTECTED UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE**

We appeal to you with a request to take urgent measures regarding ongoing large-scale new construction in the Vilnius Historic Centre, which in our view, is destroying the outstanding universal values of this UNESCO protected site.

The Republic of Lithuania ratified the World Heritage Convention on 31 March 1992. As of today, four Lithuanian world heritage sites have been included in the World Heritage list, including the Vilnius Historic Centre, inscribed on the list in 1994 (by decision No. 541) as meeting criteria (ii) and (iv). In 2014, the World Heritage Committee affirmed the site's Outstanding Universal Value.

By order of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture has been tasked with protecting the Vilnius Historic Centre. A Revitalization Strategy for the Vilnius Old Town was prepared in 1995–1996, leading to the creation in 1998 of the Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency. In 2013, the Minister of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania established a Supervisory Commission for the Preservation and Sustainable Use of the Vilnius Historic Centre as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (hereinafter – the Supervisory Commission). Unfortunately, these institutions are not sufficiently capable of ensuring the preservation of the Vilnius Old town.

International and local experts have repeatedly pointed out that the Vilnius Historic Centre is not being sufficiently protected. The World Heritage Committee issued a warning concerning such insufficient protection in 2005. As a result, in 2010, the Lithuanian State Commission for Cultural Heritage determined that unduly extensive changes had taken place over fifteen years within the Vilnius Historic Centre. In 2012, the World Heritage Committee urged the local authorities to finalize the special plan, begun in 2008, which, *inter alia*, was meant to establish and augment the requirements for the preservation of the Vilnius Old Town and set up a system of specific management measures. Unfortunately, these problems continue to go unresolved today even as large-scale new construction intensifies in the Vilnius Historic Centre.

A serious threat has recently arisen to one of the most significant and beautiful landmarks of the Vilnius Old Town: the former Vilnius Missionary Monastery and Church of the Ascension complex (hereinafter – the Missionary Complex), the importance of which was emphasized in the nominating petition to include the Vilnius Historic Centre on the UNESCO World Heritage List, indicating that, from a historical perspective, the principle buildings and complexes of the Vilnius Old Town fall into six large groupings, one of which is the baroque Visitandine-Missionary Church.

Since early 2017 a large-scale project constructing modern apartment buildings (with an area of approximately 9,500 m<sup>2</sup>) has been taking place within the Missionary Complex, irreversibly altering the historical landscape of the site which has contributed immensely to shaping the beautiful panorama of the Vilnius Old Town. As a result of numerous flawed decisions adopted by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture, the Department of Cultural Heritage, and the Vilnius City Municipality, the territory of the Missionary Complex, heretofore subject to strict protection measures as an integral whole, was divided into two separate plots. The decisions also revised its preservation regulations by abolishing a protection zone, and permitted the construction of five multi-story apartment buildings with a 122-space underground parking garage by excavating the historic Old Town terrain on the grounds of the former monastery gardens. We wish to emphasize that this project, being developed by private investors, was never presented to the public, circumventing all public participation and public deliberation procedures. The aforementioned Vilnius Historic Centre Supervisory Commission was also not given the opportunity to fully investigate and review the project.

Regrettably, the project, so potentially damaging to the Missionary Complex, also received the likely unethical assistance of the Lithuanian ICOMOS National Committee. Three of the Committees' members with clear conflict of interest and driven by their personal self-interest in the project undertook the private initiative to prepare a report in support of this detrimental construction project, presenting it under the disguise of self-proclaimed "Assessment of the Potential Impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of the Vilnius Historic Centre, a UNESCO World Heritage Site", paid for by the construction developer. The Vilnius Old Town site manager failed to ensure the preservation of this unique cultural heritage site.

We wish to draw your attention to the fact that the highest Lithuanian state cultural heritage expert body, the State Commission for Cultural Heritage, refused to approve project proposals to construct apartment buildings with underground parking facilities on the Missionary Complex in 2016. The Commission found that the project proposals would have a negative impact on the Old Town panorama and skyline and that the proposed construction density would have a detrimental effect on the character of the surrounding area. In addition, the Commission warned that the implementation of the project would damage the outstanding universal value and authenticity of the Vilnius Historic Centre. The Secretariat of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO has fully concurred with this opinion.

It should be noted that the Department of Cultural Heritage under the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture, which had approved the construction of the Missionary Complex, admitted its mistakes in its report prepared by an internal audit commission, which found numerous breaches and violations, including a finding that the separation of the Complex into separate plots would be detrimental to its cultural heritage values and those of the Vilnius Historic Centre. Moreover, in response to high public interest, responsible officials admitted that the adoption of decisions with criminal consequences from a cultural heritage perspective were influenced by politicians potentially driven by their own private interests in the project. One fact is particularly disgraceful: a criminal conviction order issued by the Vilnius City District Court found that a person representing interests of the apartment building complex developer offered and provided a bribe to a section head of the Department of Cultural Heritage in exchange for an approval by that official, or his subordinate, for the special plan proposal for the Missionary Complex, thereby satisfying the developer's goal to construct new buildings with the largest usable area possible.

Concerned with the future of the Vilnius Old Town and seeking to protect and preserve its unique landscape, the public has repeatedly appealed to national and municipal institutions, petitioned authorities, organized protests, and requested suspension of the construction taking place within the Missionary Complex. Unfortunately, the detrimental construction continues, despite these intensive public protests, the objections of the State Commission for Cultural Heritage, the unfavorable findings of the Department of Cultural Heritage internal audit, and an ongoing investigation by the Lithuanian State Territorial Planning and Construction Inspectorate regarding the legality of the construction permit.

Being convinced of the extraordinary threat arising to the Missionary Complex and the Vilnius Historic Centre and the inability of local governmental institutions to prevent the clear damage which is being done to our heritage sites, and in accordance with Paragraph 172 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, we are hereby informing you of this problem and request your assistance in preventing the destruction of this cultural heritage site of world-wide importance. **We ask you to immediately appoint a task force and mission to assess the situation and condition of the Vilnius Historic Centre *in situ* and take appropriate measures.**

We kindly request that a response to this appeal be transmitted to the following email addresses: [info@apss.lt](mailto:info@apss.lt), [abaskauskaitė@gmail.com](mailto:abaskauskaitė@gmail.com), [info@gelbekimsenamiesti.lt](mailto:info@gelbekimsenamiesti.lt), [sakalas.gorodeckis@gmail.com](mailto:sakalas.gorodeckis@gmail.com), [info@zverynas.lt](mailto:info@zverynas.lt), [rasukolonija@gmail.com](mailto:rasukolonija@gmail.com), [gelbekimtrakus@gmail.com](mailto:gelbekimtrakus@gmail.com).

Respectfully,

Asta Baškauskaitė  
Elder, Vilnius Old Town municipality  
Chairwoman, Vilnius Eldership Council  
Member, Supervisory Commission for the Preservation and Sustainable Use of the Outstanding Value of the Vilnius Historic Centre

Genė Valeinienė  
Council Member, Vilnius Old Town Community Association

Sakalas Gorodeckis  
Chairman, Association of Vilnius Communities

Danutė Jokubėnienė  
Chairwoman, Žvėrynas Community Association

Živilė Cibutavičienė  
Chairwoman, Rasų Colony Community Association

Lina Leparskienė and Rasa Kalinauskaitė  
Members, Lithuanian Movement for Environmental and Cultural Heritage Preservation