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Mindaugas Kvietkauskas

Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania

J. Basanavičius g. 5

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Lithuania

Tuesday 29th September 2020

Dear Mr Kvietkauskas,

I write to you on behalf of the Conference of European Rabbis, Europe's leading rabbinical alliance representing some 700 Orthodox rabbis in mainstream communities in over 50 European countries. We work on a range of issues, including challenging antisemitism and protecting religious practice. Our aim is to ensure that Europe's Jewish communities can flourish in open and tolerant European societies.

As you will know, plans for the expansion of an existing sports centre on the site of the historic Vilnius Jewish cemetery in Snipiskes has caused great distress within the Jewish communities in Lithuania, as well as across Europe and the entire Jewish world.

Since the onset of Soviet rule, there have been numerous construction projects undertaken on this holy site without proper consultation with the Jewish community in Lithuania and its religious leadership. The approval for the construction of a multi-million-dollar sports centre on this historic Jewish cemetery by your department is a continuation of this trend. The vast majority of Lithuanian Jews, who now predominantly live in the US and Israel, are the descendants of those buried within its grounds. As such, they do not support any construction plans on the site due to their ancestral connections.

The Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe (CPJCE) does not have the authority to, G-d forbid, approve the continued desecration of the cemetery through any further digging, exploration and development – either on or around the cemetery site. On behalf of the Conference of European Rabbis, I want to clarify that the CPJCE lost the authority to liaise with the Lithuanian Government on this vital issue because they did not respond to a summons of the Rabbinical Court, and subsequently do not represent the voice of European Jewry. Let me also be clear that the Conference of European Rabbis no longer maintains a formal affiliation with the group. We therefore urge the Lithuanian Government to cease all communications with the CPJCE and to continue to liaise with the Conference of European Rabbis and other leading Jewish organisations on issues relating to European Jewry.

A Change.org petition started by a member of the Jewish community in Vilnius opposing any further development on this site has now received over 50,000 signatures. Global Jewish leaders from around the world including R' Chaim Kanievsky – a foremost Rabbinic leader in the international Jewish community – have signed up in opposition to the planned development. This should give an indication of the strength of opposition to the proposed desecration of the cemetery.

In 2008, the US House of Representatives passed a motion condemning Lithuania for its "failure to protect the historic Jewish cemetery in Vilnius". On behalf of Europe's Jewish communities, we implore you to learn from the mistakes of the past and to halt all further development plans immediately. Any development on this site would be a profound desecration and a source of shame for Lithuania that would resonate throughout history.

I look forward to hearing from you.



Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt

President of the Conference of European Rabbis