Resolution on the return of Romanian national treasure illegally appropriated by Russia

2024/2605(RSP) - 14/03/2024 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted the resolution on the return of Romanian national treasure illegally appropriated by Russia.

The text adopted in plenary was tabled by the EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA, ECR, The Left groups.

The First World War forced the Romanian Government of the time to entrust Romania's national treasure to an allied state for protection against destruction. The national treasure legally given into Russian custody comprised 91.5 tonnes of fine gold belonging to the reserves of the National Bank of Romania, royal collections of jewels and rare coins, together with priceless cultural and historical assets, such as state archives, documents, precious historical manuscripts, heritage paintings, rare books and collections from many public and private institutions, spanning over five centuries of Romanian history.

The resolution stated that despite several attempts at diplomatic negotiations in the aftermath of the First World War, the Romanian national treasure has never been fully returned by Russia, as had been legally stipulated in the official bilateral agreement between the two states. It should be noted that some of the cultural, religious and archival goods belonging to the national treasure illegally appropriated by Russia were returned to Romania in 1935 and 1956. However, to date, none of the outstanding 91.5 tonnes of fine gold, which are part of the reserves of the National Bank of Romania, have been returned, despite the protocols signed upon the transfer of the treasure to Russia.

Parliament stated that there are legislative grounds for the return of cultural goods and national treasures that have been removed from the territory of an EU country unlawfully through a breach of the legislation in force or a breach of the conditions under which temporary authorisation was granted for their removal. Romania has a fully legally valid claim to its national treasure that was evacuated to Russia in 1916 and 1917.

Bringing about the return of the Romanian national treasure requires a tailor-made European response, thus expanding the scope of the EU's approach towards the restitution of cultural assets unlawfully removed from EU countries' territories.

Parliament deplored Russia's failure to fully return the Romanian national treasure to Romania, in accordance with the obligation explicitly outlined in the official bilateral agreements between the two states and as expected under international law and norms. It urged Russia to fully return to Romania the remainder of Romania's national treasure that was sent to Russia for safekeeping in 1916 and 1917.

The Commission is called on to:

- expand the scope of the EU policies governing the protection of cultural goods to include the recovery of national treasures relocated during wartime under bilateral agreements between states;

- create concrete synergies with the Romanian State, the National Bank of Romania and other relevant institutions in order to mobilise coordinated efforts and to pursue all diplomatic means of mediating, promoting communication – where appropriate – with Russian counterparts and seeking solutions to ensure that the missing national treasure is returned to where it belongs without delay;

- explore the possibility of acting as a partner to the Romanian representatives involved in the Romanian-Russian Joint Commission mandated to discuss the return of the Romanian national treasure.