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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	AOB for the meeting of the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council on 19 and 20 November 2026: Protection and promotion of the European underwater cultural heritage beyond national borders *- Information from Bulgaria*

This year marks 30 years since the adoption of the ICOMOS Charter on the Protection and Management of Underwater Cultural Heritage, adopted by the General Assembly of ICOMOS in Sofia, Bulgaria in October 1996. The principles and best practices outlined in the Charter directly shaped the Annex Rules of the landmark 2001 UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, whose 25th anniversary is being celebrated also in 2026. To mark the occasion as well as the International Day of Underwater Cultural Heritage, an active programme to promote the Convention was implemented nationally with a series of events, such as exhibitions, public lectures, film screenings, and presentations took place at dozens of schools in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Nessebar and Sozopol.

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In the light of these milestones, we are proud to announce that 2026 marks also the official designation of the Bulgarian Underwater Heritage Institute as a UNESCO Category 2 Centre for the Black Sea region.

The Institute (formerly Centre for Underwater Archaeology) established in 1978 is the oldest institution of its kind in Eastern Europe and represents the first such organisation to operate actively in the Black Sea basin. Due to its accumulated expertise and the efforts of dedicated experts and policymakers, Bulgaria became the first country in Europe to ratify the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

The main tasks of the Institute for Underwater Heritage are related to the preservation, research, and documentation of underwater cultural heritage within the territorial waters and exclusive economic zone of Bulgaria in the Black Sea, as well as in the inland water bodies of the Republic of Bulgaria. As one of the world’s pioneering organizations of its kind, funded by the national budget under the authority of the Minister of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Institute engages in a wide range of activities: scientific research (conducting annual surveys in the Black Sea and the Danube River), regulatory oversight (monitoring construction projects to ensure the protection of underwater cultural heritage), education (organizing training courses and workshops in underwater archaeology, marine geophysics, photogrammetry, etc.) and public outreach (hosting exhibitions, conferences, and media engagements).

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Through this new recognition, the Institute will play a key role in advancing the sustainable management of cultural heritage, ocean literacy, and scientific cooperation. It will also actively contribute to the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property by strengthening national inventories and the monitoring of underwater archaeological sites. To enhance its regional impact, the Institute will foster cooperation with other UNESCO Category 2 centers, academic institutions, and international research networks. The designation of the Underwater Heritage Institute as a UNESCO Category 2 Centre for the Black Sea region helps to consolidate Bulgaria's position as a leading nation in the field of underwater and global cultural heritage within the region. At the same time, it fosters ongoing efforts to build expert networks, provide training for stakeholders involved in the preservation of underwater heritage, and carry out various joint initiatives with countries in the Black Sea region - as well as other regions - with which memoranda of understanding and/or cooperation have been established. The Institute has been collaborating at regional and European level with the International Centre for Underwater Archaeology in Zadar – the first UNESCO Regional Centre in Europe, as well as with other partners within various fora, incl. the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea and the BCT Hubs.

In view of the above context and taking into account the current environmental and geopolitical challenges, incl. the situation in the Black Sea, we consider it essential to highlight the importance of the topic of protection, preservation and promotion of underwater cultural heritage as a shared historic and cultural resource for the European identity and next generations. The climate change, sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and marine pollution along with human activities, such as intensive commercial fishing, anchoring, deep-sea exploration, and illegal salvage or looting have impact or characterise threats for submerged sites and heritage.

Although Member States work proactively depending on their national frameworks, specificities and resources, the protection and promotion of underwater cultural heritage should not be a single state priority – it needs a joint effort and a shared duty.

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At EU level there are a number of opportunities for the protection and promotion of underwater cultural heritage, particularly in the field of maritime and research policies and instruments. Those opportunities could be further enhanced by elevating underwater cultural heritage on the EU political agenda together with fostering dialogue and cooperation between MS, third countries and international organisations.

We invite other like-minded MS and the European Commission to unite efforts in the general aim of the promotion of underwater cultural heritage at EU level, with a view to co-shaping common initiatives with European dimension in the long-term.

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