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**Unesco-erkenning**

Esteemed Director General,

On March 3rd 2019, thousands of carnivalists – both members of the 71 official and the 188 individual groups and all-round party-goers – take part in the annual carnival procession in the streets of Aalst. They traditionally present their personal and humoristic perspective on a wide variety of events from the past year. The carnival group *De Vismooil'n* decides to take the back bench this year, therefore choosing the theme *A Sabbath Year*. A commonly used expression referring to taking a break, free from financial worries and debts. To symbolise this they put caricatures of Jews on their float. At earlier carnival editions, the same caricatures were used, but then used to express other themes: depicted as crusaders, among other things.

During the 2019 carnival parade, none of the 80000 spectators in the streets or the stands took offence at the float created by *De Vismooil'n*. However, television recordings of the float went viral, quickly followed by fierce criticism expressed by the Jewish community. These reactions reached the city of Aalst via various media channels and direct e-mails.

In a swift response, and without any inquiry or dialogue, UNESCO condemns the “racist and anti-Semitic representations of Aalst Carnival” on March 6th. “Freedom of speech and the satirical character of Aalst Carnival should not result in a manifestation of hatred”, according to the UNESCO Directory General. On March 21st, the 2003 UNESCO Intergovernmental

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Committee puts the (possible) removal of Aalst Carnival from the UNESCO list of Intangible Heritage on the agenda of the Bogotá Convention.

Shortly after the media storm in March, representatives of Aalst Carnival and of the carnival group entered into a serene dialogue with representatives of the Jewish community. Both parties showed an enormous willingness to listen. The carnival group feels empathic towards the offended Jewish community, gives a detailed explanation of the buildup of the theme and float and explicitly states that there was never any intention to generate anti-Semitism or discrimination. Although the carnivalists make explicit amends to the Jewish community should they have caused any unintentional hurt, they cannot apologize for celebrating Aalst Carnival, sparked with its inseparable humour. The joint visit of carnivalists and Jewish delegates to the Dossin Kazerne, a Holocaust and Human Rights memorial, symbolises the willingness to heal all wounds.

**Today, the city of Aalst formally distances itself from the UNESCO recognition awarded to Aalst Carnival as part of the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Not only because it threatens to damage the intangible heritage itself, but also because of UNESCO's approach to the whole process over the past months.**

We justify this decision based on the following arguments:

- **UNESCO decontextualises the float, resulting in a detrimental stigma for Aalst Carnival**

Many traditional carnival groups consider Aalst Carnival the true example of cultural heritage where carnival is experienced as a reversal ritual. Rich becomes poor, man becomes woman, white becomes black... The carnival dynamics is showcased on the streets by presenting current themes in an unvarnished way while being dressed-up. Spectators may possibly be shocked by various and diverse themes, as this is an inherent dimension of carnival. Carnival should be considered as a three-day defined context where it is temporarily allowed to mock a variety of themes one normally would not touch.

International media and UNESCO decontextualising these floats threaten to damage the community and its intangible heritage. The framing character of the UNESCO communication labels Aalst Carnival as a racist event and accuses everyone involved in



carnival as an anti-Semitic community, which is in clear contradiction with the values Aalst Carnival represents. Featuring on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has become counterproductive and damaging to the communities involved, their heritage and other stakeholders. The parties involved never signed up for this.

Based on the Operational Directives (OD 102) made by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for Conserving Intangible Heritage, we conclude that the international heritage organisation goes against its own 'context' directives. Furthermore, the swift conviction as anti-Semitic representation – without any previous consultation with the Aalst Carnival heritage community – diametrically opposes the UNESCO ethical principles, valid since the 2003 Convention: “ethical principle 6. Each community, group or individual should assess the value of its own intangible cultural heritage and this intangible cultural heritage should not be subject to external judgements of value or worth.”

- **UNESCO urges the city of Aalst to censorship and a top-down intervention in the heritage community's actions**

UNESCO basically urges to intervene in the city's intangible heritage policy, thus threatening the heritage's dynamics and applying a form of censorship, damaging carnival's DNA. In Flanders, Aalst Carnival is known as the heyday of freedom of speech. A large-scaled folk festival, that features explicitly mocking, anarchistic and political social satirical characteristics.

As a local or any other government, it is not easy nor desirable to intervene in these intangible heritage matters. The heritage communities are in charge, in the true spirit of the UNESCO Convention. They have to shape the traditions and the specific realization of carnival and its floats. Enforcing rules or censorship would strongly influence the intangible cultural heritage, both from a top-down and an external level, and thus pressurise the values of freedom of speech.

We are conscious of the ethical principles drawn up by the Convention, safeguarding the fragile balance between the heritage community's autonomy and external interventions. Furthermore, in 2019 the city of Aalst subscribed the ethical principles issued by the Flemish Community, following the UNESCO principles. The heritage community has repeatedly taken



the initiative to keep the Aalst Carnival moral standard high. This hurtful incident will most likely spark actions to raise awareness concerning ethics during carnival, but it will be done without external intervention in the legal rights to culture and freedom of expression.

- **UNESCO ignores legal verification**

It cannot be emphasized enough that racism and anti-Semitism has no place in Aalst or in Flanders. Every law concerning these topics was adhered to during Aalst Carnival at all time. No laws were broken by the carnivalists involved, nor did they act in a malicious, racist or anti-Semitic manner. Despite the use of stereotypical and caricatural representations, it is out of the question that both the intention of the heritage community and the message conducted on the floats presented in the specific context of Aalst Carnival, can be considered as an intentional manifestation of anti-Semitism or hatred.

Unia, the Interfederal Equal Opportunities Centre, examined the case. Unia aims to tackle discrimination and is an independent public institution. In the past, Unia has repeatedly come forward when suspecting a violation of discrimination criteria. The recent carnival parade and float involved were the subject of an enhanced Unia investigation, examining possible legal violations of discrimination and anti-Semitism. Unia concludes that no laws have been broken and no malicious intentions could be detected towards the Jewish community. No official complaint has been made against the carnival group involved.

- **UNESCO shuns dialogue and a fair trial**

The draft decision, leading up to the Bogotá Convention, reads like a criminal indictment. The UNESCO draft decision literally contradicts the Unia conclusion ("Unia (...) confirmed that the representations of Jewish communities are indeed anti-Semitic"), showing nothing but a biased opinion stated by an organisation seemingly unwilling to learn to understand the local carnival celebrations.

Furthermore, the draft decision contains and disperses manifestly false information on many levels. As a local government we are astonished that an international organisation boasting the slogan 'building peace in the minds of men and women' and 'fostering freedom of expression' as a mission, cultivates quite the opposite. The decision to remove Aalst



Carnival from the list will be based on a partly incorrect report, lacking in a thorough dialogue between communities, groups and individuals. The UNESCO conviction, dated March 6th, has led to upheaval and polarisation, undermining the dialogue in a serene atmosphere and in the UNESCO 'building peace in the minds of men and women' spirit, rather than facilitating the necessary discussions and mediating the peace process.

- **The heritage community does no longer support the UNESCO recognition**

On September 28<sup>th</sup> 2019, the future of Aalst Carnival was the topic of discussion at a Carnival Convention. The 580 invitees were carefully selected, so as to have a fair representation of those concerned. The convention had 188 attendees, representing all layers of carnival society (official and individual groups, former princes, aspiring princes, members of the organising committee, carnival enthusiasts...). They were asked whether Aalst Carnival should still feature on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. A vast majority (58%) voted no, 20,6% did not have an opinion and a minority (21,4%) voted yes.

It is clear that the majority of the Aalst Carnival supporters – and the greater part of the citizens of Aalst – no longer want to be associated with an organisation that has so carelessly dealt with the incident. UNESCO failed to take into account the bigger and specific context of the lively heritage of Aalst Carnival, a great annual feast uniting not only the carnival group involved, but thousands of enthusiasts, proud to be a member of their dynamic city.

**These arguments strengthen the city of Aalst in its decision to, on behalf of the carnival community, formally distance itself from the UNESCO recognition awarded to Aalst Carnival as part of the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.**

**We thoroughly believe that this recognition currently has a more damaging than safeguarding effect on our local intangible heritage and the Aalst Carnival community. Carnival is lively heritage with thousands of people involved. In a united spirit of humour and satire this annual three-day feast turns the world upside down, celebrating the human right of freedom of speech and creativity. It is inevitable that boundaries are sometimes crossed and some members of society feel offended. Even then, we always reach out for dialogue in this pluralistic and diverse society. The carnival group has shown its remorse. Nevertheless, because of UNESCO's approach, reconciliation has**



**made way for incomprehension and polarisation. Even without the recognition, Aalst Carnival shall remain a huge folk festival, which has never and will never intentionally hurt or discriminate anyone.**

Yours sincerely,



**Wim Leerman**  
algemeen directeur



**Christoph D'Haese**  
burgemeester