

# INHERITING HERITAGE

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This text marks the beginning of a series of materials about the state of affairs in key aspects of the protection of Ukrainian heritage. The first conversation is with Natalia Dziubenko, an expert in the area of cultural heritage, museologist, member of the board of ICOM Ukraine (International Council of Museums – Ed.), and Denys Yashnyi, head of the monitoring group of the Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies. The experts talked to Anastasiia Platonova about the main challenges facing the heritage sector at the end of the third year of the full-scale war, the power of communities and the importance of an asymmetric response to the enemy in protecting Ukraine’s own identity and international advocacy.



*Photo: Facebook/ICOM Ukraine  
The statue of Hryhorii Skovoroda in the memorial museum in the Kharkiv region after a Russian shell hit the building, May 2022*

## WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION AT THE END OF THE THIRD YEAR OF THE FULL-SCALE WAR?

**Denys Yashnyi:** These challenges for Ukraine have not fundamentally changed since 2014, they have only grown in scale. Unfortunately, we are now almost powerless in the face of external challenges caused by Russia’s actions. Before the full-scale invasion, some levers of Ukraine and international organizations were still in place, whereas now everything is more complicated.



*Photo: uacrisis.org  
Denys Yashnyi*

Domestic challenges have not fundamentally changed either. The inability of Ukraine's public cultural sector to meet the demands of wartime remains central. Civil society is more effective and has more expertise in this regard.

**Natalia Dziubenko:** I would clearly divide all the challenges into those caused by the war and those that we had before because there was no shortage of them earlier and they have not vanished. First of all, these challenges include everything related to the evacuation and dismantling of permanent exhibitions, which museums coped with to the best of their abilities. As for the failure of the state as a key challenge, we need to distinguish between the concepts of possibility and capacity. For example, a museum cannot be held responsible for the fact that the Ministry of Culture has failed to create a policy, develop a mechanism or write guidelines.



*Photo: Facebook/Natalie Dziubenko*

Thus, at the end of the third year of the full-scale war, I would say that the main challenge in the field of cultural heritage protection is the security

issue. It has been extremely relevant since 2014. The war that began at that point had a significant impact on the museum sector: back then we already had losses, heritage objects were taken away, museums were evacuated, etc. The museum community, of course, was aware of the risks other regions could face if the war zone expanded.

That period revealed how many problems we have in the industry: in particular, it turned out that the relevant ministry did not have any materials in duplicate: when a museum is occupied and there is no access to documentation, we are left empty-handed.

Regrettable as it may be, not much has changed since then. This year, the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine was presented. However, this platform still needs to be filled with a huge amount of data before it can become fully operational. We also have huge staffing problems: some people left the country, some were conscripted, some moved within the borders of the country. At the moment, the staff situation resembles a snowball that keeps growing.

**WHAT OTHER NON-SO-OBVIOUS CHALLENGES ARE THERE? FOR EXAMPLE, DENYS HAS ALREADY MENTIONED WORKING WITH INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE FIELD OF HERITAGE PROTE-**

**CTION. IT IS EQUALLY DIFFICULT TO MONITOR WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE HERITAGE IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES REMOTELY. WHAT OTHER PRESSURE POINTS ARE THERE?**

**D.Ya.:** Let me start with a brief historical background. There are two resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers dating back to the early 1990s on the list of museums that can keep the state part of the museum fund. One of them is dedicated to sectoral museums, institutions and enterprises. In Crimea, there were 82 museums that, according to this resolution, could store the state part of the museum fund of Ukraine. We have no idea how many items were kept in those museums. Moreover, some of these museums had already ceased to exist at the time of the annexation of Crimea. We do not know what happened to their collections.

It is indeed a very strange feeling when you, as a Ukrainian heritage expert, have to refer in your work to the catalog of the Russian museum fund, where they enter our items: over the years, 600,000 items from Crimea and Sevastopol have been entered. And when you tell the Europeans that this is theft, banal misappropriation, their response is, "How can you prove that these are yours, Ukrainian items?" And you realize that you don't even have an answer.



*Photo: bnr.bg*

*Jewelry from the Pereshchepyna Treasure in the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. This is the richest treasure found in Eastern Europe. It was discovered near the village of Mala Pereshchepyna, Poltava region, Novi Sanzhary district, in 1912).*

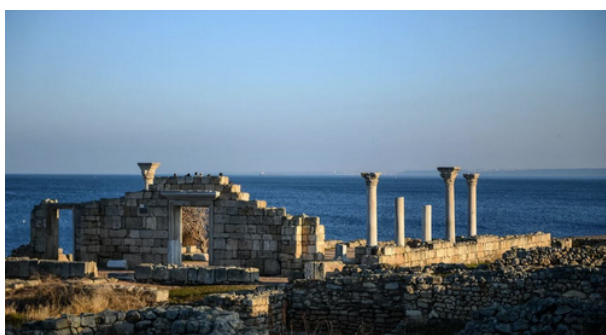
Another major problem with the occupied territories is staffing. Most of the museum workers who knew these collections stayed in Crimea. The lack of qualified specialists who could work with at least some information about museums in the occupied territories is a great challenge.

Unfortunately, civil society organizations cannot take on the role of the state here, even though they work with remote monitoring projects. For example, we at the Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies do this. In the absence of sufficient capacity, the state could at least communicate more carefully about the heritage in the occupied territories. It is impossible to take individual cases out of context and give them media coverage while ignoring all the others.

This turns into normalizing evil and it poses a grave danger.

**N.D.:** I agree with Denys: the situation in Crimea is really complicated. De jure, the collections have remained in their places, but de facto, we don't know if any objects have been moved. These objects are indeed included in the catalogs of the Russian state museum fund, as are the works stolen by Russia during the full-scale war. As a consequence, the objects are treated not as stolen from the territory of Ukraine, but as Russian.

There is another problem that is relevant to Crimea: the issue of archaeological excavations and related scientific research. They are also illegal because it is an occupied territory. The monuments found as a result of the excavations are also in the Russian system, and this also constitutes a crime.



*Photo: Russian media*

*Tauric Chersonesos Preserve, which on June 23, 2013, together with its chora (agricultural district), was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.*

As for remote monitoring, the problem is that it requires a large network of specialists in OSINT (Open source intelligence – Ed.), who constantly monitor what is happening to the collections. This work is performed by museum workers, including those from the occupied territories, but their efforts do not suffice – the network needs to be expanded significantly.

We have just launched a project on this topic at ICOM Ukraine. It has two directions.

The first one covers monitoring with the help of OSINT tools and related training. The second one is about working with propaganda, i.e. identifying cases where Russian museums become propaganda tools and Russian museum workers participate in perpetrating these crimes.

The search for heritage objects stolen by Russia is a matter that takes many years. It requires people from the research and searching community who constantly monitor the sites where these objects may appear. My experience as a museum worker shows that if an object is not physically destroyed, sooner or later it will surface somewhere. It may happen tomorrow or in 50 years. Our tasks here are to have a register of stolen objects, develop policies and be consistent and patient.



**DO THE STATE AUTHORITIES HAVE A REGISTER OF THESE ITEMS?**

**N.D.:** Not yet. This is a job that takes years and a lot of human resource. To be honest, I don't know if it is going to materialize during my professional life.

**CAN WE SAY THAT AFTER THREE YEARS OF THE FULL-SCALE WAR, THE STATE HAS FINALLY REALIZED WHAT IT IS PROTECTING IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND HOW TO WORK WITH IT BOTH AT THE LEVEL OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND AT THE STRATEGIC LEVEL?**

**D.Ya.:** In my opinion, there are quite a few problems, but some work has been done. And here I would talk not only about the last three years, but also about the period from 2014 to 2022. In particular, the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation was established. This was very important for increasing the independence of the museum and cultural environment in general.

In 2019, the Ministry of Culture also adopted Order No. 501 on Amendments to the Procedure for Registering Cultural Heritage Objects, according to which all objects that had registration cards before the Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage came into force were put on state register. In addition, albeit formally, museum departments of the occupied territories have been created – let's say that the representative functions

of these museums are assigned to the directors of other museum institutions in the government-controlled territory. Of course, this is not enough. Unfortunately, in terms of media activity, the state has been addressing this issue on a case-by-case basis and unsystematically.

Some important steps have also been taken since the start of the full-scale invasion. A case in point is the development of amendments to the Procedure for the registration of cultural heritage sites, which began in 2023. A cultural heritage site identification card has also appeared, which is a record, a description of the monument and a visual inspection act. The local authority registers the object, but then the cultural heritage protection body of the final level must develop an object's registration card within three years. Let me remind you that this can only be done by institutions that have a code number 7220 and the appropriate number of qualified employees.



*Photo: Suspilne  
Denis Yashnyi*

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My take is that we need to introduce a time frame for the frontline areas. After all, currently the document confirming the condition of a monument for the state authorities is a visual inspection report. But some territories are simply not accessible or dangerous to be in.

**N.D.:** Here I can also note the ineffectiveness of the state institutions that have to act in such a threatening environment. They really have little time to respond to all the challenges. The environment of heritage protection in recent challenging years has been largely maintained thanks to the cooperation of non-governmental institutions, individual experts and professional networks.

Moving on to remote monitoring, this is, in fact, very difficult to implement, even if we are talking about movable heritage. For example, if I find an object stolen from the occupied territories using OSINT tools, the question arises: how do I register it so that it can later become part of a criminal case?

At the end of the third year of the full-scale war, we seem to have more or less resolved the urgent issues of evacuation and preservation of collections (although some problems remain unaddressed). The next step is

to focus on such tasks as recording Russia's crimes against Ukrainian heritage in order to go to international courts and get our property back later.

I am sure that civic associations and initiatives also have an important role to play here. This effort would certainly be incomplete without state involvement because it is the state that has to initiate proceedings in international courts. Still, I would not count on the leadership of state institutions.



*Photo: Facebook.Alexander Gimanov*  
*On the night of November 15, 2024, a Russian attack in Odesa damaged cultural heritage sites protected by UNESCO. The buildings of the Historical Center of Odesa were damaged, including the premises of the Mechnykov Odesa National University and the Paleontological Museum, whose origins go back to 1873.*

**THE LAST THREE YEARS HAVE SHOWN THAT WITHOUT THE HELP OF PROFESSIONAL JOINT AND INDEPENDENT INITIATIVES, THE STATE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO COPE WITH THE PROTECTION OF HERITAGE. BUT WE STILL RUN INTO**

**THE LEVEL OF POLICIES IN THIS AREA, WHICH REMAIN THE FUNCTION OF THE STATE AND WHICH IT HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO PERFORM. WHAT, IN YOUR OPINION, HAS BEEN DONE IN THIS AREA OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS AND WHAT, UNFORTUNATELY, HAS NOT?**

**D.Ya.:** In order to create any public policies, we must first understand where we are going. There are many components, from developing a strategy to having qualified personnel to implement it. Unfortunately, the state is not currently capable of doing this. This is where independent institutions, experts and the heritage community come to the fore again. It would be great if conscious Ukrainian businesses joined this community.

We have now reached a juncture where individual citizens of our country – businessmen, local government leaders and members of local communities – are becoming heirs to the heritage, beginning to sense themselves as part of the country's past. But again, where is the state here? It should accumulate this demand and use it as a driving force for creating a heritage protection strategy. It should build a strategy – not a top-down one, but a bottom-up one. The horizontal links and networking ability that characterize our society should now be used to create a strategy for heritage protection.

Given the lack of resources, the state must build its policies by acting as a hub of ideas. No money to employ 100 people to develop strategies? Fine, be a manager of your task: involve partners, cooperate. Don't be afraid of competition from NGOs and local authorities: they work for you and, sometimes, instead of you. Unfortunately, at present, the relationship between central authorities and expert NGOs is reduced to the fact that everyone meets, signs memoranda, shakes hands, and that's it.

**WE SEE VERY CLEAR PATTERNS OF RUSSIA'S TREATMENT OF UKRAINIAN HERITAGE IN THE OCCUPIED AND FRONTLINE TERRITORIES: DESTRUCTION, THEFT, APPROPRIATION, ETC. IT LOOKS LIKE A HOLISTIC, CONSISTENT POLICY OF ERASING AND BLURRING UKRAINIAN IDENTITY. WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT HOW THESE PATTERNS WORK?**



*Photo: Facebook/Natalie Dzyubenko*

**N.D.:** Ukraine is a huge European country with very different regional cultures and a diverse regional and

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national heritage. But it's important to realize that our heritage is part of world heritage in terms of diversity and sustainability.

In this regard, we have to talk about the value of heritage at all levels, particularly that it can be a source of regional development. In Ukraine, there are very cool cases where entire regional economies are built around heritage: for instance, the Tustan Historical and Cultural Preserve. This is an example of a capable team that has grown with the institution, building a real heritage ecosystem over 20 years of consistent work.

Coming back to what Russia is doing with our heritage, they take what they can appropriate by fitting it into their historical narratives. And what they cannot, they simply annihilate. Entire collections are physically destroyed, including weaving, local embroidered towels and local clothing. This is a very deliberate and consistent destruction of Ukrainian identity. And this clearly shows that no one will preserve it except us. That is why our job is to save and preserve our heritage.

**D.Ya.:** The state should talk to heritage operators, to those who have been working in this field for a long time or are now entering it from related fields. Because only in dialogue with them

will the state, represented by central executive bodies, be able to understand where it is and where to go next.

Unfortunately, we will not be able to beat Russia in soft power in the near future. We simply lack the resources to do so. The strategic goal should be to first accumulate resources to join the fight for soft power in Europe and the world. Of course, in parallel, we have to speak out about what is happening to our heritage. But, unfortunately, these cases are gradually turning into exactly the same illustrations of Russian crimes without in-depth analysis. And this, alas, does not bring us closer to victory in the area of international advocacy for Ukraine. So we need to create these resources. The state apparatus must finally realize that it works only thanks to the heritage community and learn to interact with it correctly.



*Photo: Facebook/ICOM Ukraine*

*On the night of August 24, 2024, in Huliaipole, Zaporizhzhia region, the Russian occupiers destroyed the local lore museum. The building caught fire as a result of a shell hit and burned to the ground.*



### **HOW COULD UKRAINE MOVE FORWARD MOST EFFECTIVELY IN THE FIELD OF HERITAGE BY WORKING WITH INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, WHILST ALSO SHARING THE EXPERIENCE OF PRESERVING HERITAGE IN WARTIME, SINCE THIS MAY NOT BE THE LAST WAR ON THE CONTINENT IN THE COMING DECADES?**

**D.Ya.:** We need to change the paradigm where the state speaks for its people to a paradigm where people speak for their state, and the state helps to amplify their voices. We have to dispense with the media-centered approach to monuments and learn to talk about heritage as something personally important. We need to be able to find the keys that will allow a Briton to feel something when he reads about a destroyed Ukrainian church. As if it were a church in his hometown that was, say, 400 years old and no longer exists.

**N.D.:** We, as a heritage community, should act in the field of advocacy for Ukraine based on "all-as-one" principle. We should actively participate in international events, develop our own networks of contacts, interact with international organizations, etc. Our experts should be closely involved in the work of international institutions. Nowadays, a lot of events take place online, so instead of spending several days

traveling for a 20-minute report, you can easily do so via video link. We need to participate in all possible foreign platforms and talk about Ukraine. At every opportunity, we should come forward and tell international audiences the truth about our achievements, our position and our thoughts.



*Photo: Facebook/ICOM Ukraine  
A destroyed museum in Mariupol*

Unfortunately, Russia has been working purposefully for decades, building personal ties with many international experts and institutions, placing its own or loyal people there. We need to act asymmetrically, offering Europe our own agenda. And we already have the first successful cases. For me, the most powerful case of the last three years is the exhibition of Byzantine icons from the collection of the Khanenko Museum in the Louvre. The Khanenko Museum has done more with this exhibition than we can imagine. This is an extremely powerful act of cultural diplomacy and, at the same time, a model for all of us of how to talk about Ukrainian culture outside.

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**LEGAL NOTE**

**KATERYNA BUSOL, LAWYER, EXPERT  
AT THE CRIMEAN INSTITUTE FOR  
STRATEGIC STUDIES:**

“Legally, there are several viewpoints related to Russia’s crimes against Ukrainian heritage. The first is international perception. Ukraine, represented by the Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies, together with MP Yevheniia Kravchuk, Ukraine’s representative in PACE, has made an important stride: concepts such as ‘suppression of cultural identity’ or ‘cultural erasure’ have been introduced in the reports of [the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine](#) and the [International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine](#). This is a very important shift in how international law views crimes against Ukrainian heritage.

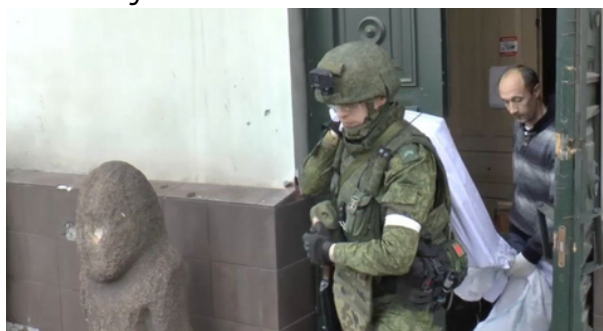


*Photo: [helsinki.org.ua](https://helsinki.org.ua)  
Kateryna Busol*

In any international courts dealing with heritage issues, including the [International Court of Justice](#), we must urge Europeans to view crimes against Ukrainian heritage as a violation of

broader human rights. This is part of the long path to substantiating the genocidal intent of Russia’s actions against Ukraine. We have finally started talking to international institutions not only about Russia’s crimes or appropriation and displacement of our cultural heritage, but also about a much broader set of topics, including decontextualization, changes in exhibition narratives, educational programs, etc., and how all this forms a broader background of Russia’s crimes against Ukrainian cultural heritage.

The second viewpoint is the documentation of Russia’s crimes in the field of heritage for future litigation. The important question is how to do it appropriately. There are recommendations [from the International Criminal Court](#) and [Eurojust](#) on documentation by civil society organizations that should be relied upon. [The Institute for International Criminal Investigations](#) also has useful [resources](#) and workshops on how to file information correctly.



*Photo: Petro Andriushchenko’s Telegram channel  
Russian military rob museum in Mariupol*

Finally, the third viewpoint is holding Russia accountable – criminally and otherwise. For example, the responsibility of the Russian Academy and some of its representatives for Russia's crimes is very important (the International Academy's response to this is also extremely important). Suffice it to recall such odious personalities as the director of the Hermitage Museum Mikhail Piotrovsky, known for his openly imperial views. The civilized world cannot tolerate people who demonstrate a complete lack of professional integrity. And our task is to present these facts to international institutions and speak about them consistently.”

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