THE PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS:

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION IN EU NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

PROJECT REPORT

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Il presente report presenta i quattro contributi realizzati nell'ambito del progetto *Il "modello italiano" per la protezione del patrimonio culturale in aree di crisi: possibili traiettorie di cooperazione nei vicinati allargati*, coordinato dalla Responsabile scientifica Prof.ssa Alessandra Russo (Scuola di Studi Internazionali, Università di Trento).

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Cultural Heritage Protection in Conflict and Beyond Conflict: Security Challenges and Ethical Dilemmas

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Introduction

The protection of cultural heritage in conflict and post-conflict settings has emerged as a critical area of concern, intertwining issues of security, identity, and human rights. As armed conflicts often lead to the destruction of historical sites, museums, and cultural artefacts, the ethical implications of safeguarding these assets become increasingly complex. While cultural heritage is frequently viewed as a universal good, its protection can raise significant dilemmas regarding the prioritization of heritage over human life, the potential for politicization, and the involvement of military actors in preservation efforts. This working paper aims to explore the multifaceted security challenges and ethical dilemmas associated with cultural heritage protection (CHP) in conflict and post-conflict situations. It will examine the implications of military interventions for heritage sites, the risks of commodification and appropriation by external actors, and the need for inclusive governance frameworks that respect local narratives and community involvement. By offering an analytic review of recent literature, the working paper seeks to make a contribution towards achieving a nuanced and up-to-date understanding of how cultural heritage can be effectively protected in conflict and post-conflict settings while addressing the rights and needs of affected populations. Moreover, it assesses the prospects of turning CHP as a catalyst for reconciliation and a crucial component of peacebuilding rather than a source of division in post-conflict situations. The concluding section offers some policy recommendations as a way to envisage the role of diplomacy in fostering inclusive and integrated approaches to post-conflict cultural heritage protection and restoration.

Cultural heritage protection as a political and security issue

Attacks on historical buildings, museums, archaeological sites, and the destruction of cultural artefacts and monuments are not new phenomena: throughout history cultural heritage (CH) has repeatedly been endangered by wars, conflicts and political violence. On the other hand, armed conflicts can themselves generate CH by creating ruins, relics, memorials, that undergo a process of "heritagization" (Sjöholm 2013, p. 9).

Historically, the destruction of cultural heritage has resulted from military operations, as a collateral damage, from the iconoclastic violence of state and non-state armed actors, as well as from various actions perpetrated by insurgents, criminals and terrorists, driven by the objectives of exploiting the strategic position of cultural heritage sites, exercising control over territories thorough plundering, financing further operations by looting and smuggling antiquities and erasing symbols of collective identities and memories. From a security studies perspective, such actions may be interpreted as novel forms of informal governance: this is the case, for example, of "violent entrepreneurs" licensing or taxing looters, smugglers and traffickers to demonstrate their institutional status, authority and control over local governance – in other words, regulating extra-legal excavation

activities as part of ruling over symbolic and spatial landscapes, as well as administering local war economies.

In the last 50 years, a number of states as well as regional and international organisations have deployed legal instruments and policy interventions to criminalise the destruction of cultural heritage, especially via a number of juridical and judicial instruments, mostly premising on the assumption that ultimately, state parties are the actors responsible for the national and international protection and preservation of cultural heritage. After WWII, a number of specialised agencies tasked of CHP have been established – e.g., the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1946), the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 1946), the International Center for the Study of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM, 1956), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, 1964). In parallel with the subsequent securitization of CHP as a transnational and non-traditional security issue (Christensen 2022; Russo and Giusti 2018), a heritage governance took shape and a heritage diplomacy started assuming a distinct character from the public and cultural diplomacy domains (Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas 2022; Winter 2015). Gradually, CH reconstruction and recovery, too, began attracting the attention of the donor community and other international stakeholders, and the deployment of conservation aid gained traction in the form of technology transfers, capacity building programs, urban planning assistance, tourism development and site management projects (Labadi 2020). On the other hand, the weaponization of CH, i.e. its use for military purposes especially in the context of urban warfare (Viejo-Rose and Sørensen 2015; Kaldor and Sassen 2020) brought about an emerging scholarly interest in the involvement of military actors in the field, i.e. through the incorporation of a cultural component within peacekeeping operations and stabilisation operations (Foradori 2016; Foradori and Rosa 2017; Leloup 2019).

Whereas cultural heritage is increasingly handled for political purposes, as an instrument of diplomacy or a catalyst for social interactions at the international, national, and local level (Chalcraft, 2021; Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas, 2022), its study from a social science perspective remains incomplete. While research on cultural heritage positioned in the field of international law is rather extensive, the perspective of International Relations and Security Studies remains circumscribed and limited. Yet, emerging topics of growing interest range from instances of convergence and divergence among different international actors attempting at contouring global governance of cultural heritage; to the militarization of cultural heritage sites through both the deployment of military personnel and equipment, and the setup of urban-architectural devices in the name of security; from the development of security practices and technologies within specialised cultural heritage agencies; to the role of private security and military companies in the protection of cultural heritage sites; from the use of cultural heritage sites as training grounds or for recruitment purposes by non-state armed actors; to dynamics of cooperation and conflict among international actors in the appropriation and distribution of reconstruction resources.

On the other hand, the activism of different international and regional actors and institutions in this field seems to premise on the assumption that cultural heritage enshrines positive externalities such as socio-political reconciliation and economic recovery. However, if not devised according to a well-thought approach, the protection of cultural heritage may reveal some criticalities, especially if external actors intervene. This is even more likely in contexts where cultural heritage sites and goods are subjects to contention and contestation, multiple stakeholders coexist, overlap and promote conflicting agendas, as well as the valorisation of cultural heritage interacts with processes of legitimation (of identities, foundational myths and histories, collective memories), commodification, securitisation.

The impact of initiatives of cultural heritage protection, conservation and reconstruction, especially in crisis-ridden contexts, should not and cannot be assessed in absolutely and unconditionally positive terms without an empirically-informed evaluation of its effects both in terms of governance and at the societal level, on local actors and communities. Initiative of heritage diplomacy, heritage assistance, heritage aid…frequently reflect patterns of convergence and divergence among public and private, global and local sources of practices and policies that construct and define cultural heritage deemed at risk, endangered, and to be protected. As effectively put by Winter (2015, p. 3) "[…] complex structures and networks of agencies, funding structures, institutional collaborations, public and private partnerships and competing notions of sovereignty, which, together, have given form to heritage and associated ideas of conservation […]".

Inclusive CHP: a chance for reconciliation and development

Whereas the international protection of cultural heritage in the context of armed conflicts has been under the spotlight of international humanitarian and criminal law, less has been generally said about post-conflict situations. Yet, conservation, restoration and reconstruction of a heritage site revive a community's link to its environment, especially for forcibly displaced populations claiming a right to return. In other words, post-conflict resettlement, repatriation, and reintegration might all include a CHP component.

CHP can also serve as a vital instrument for reconciliation and even transitional justice, addressing the goals of fostering social cohesion, rebuilding collective identities, and promoting community engagement. This can be extended to reparations (restitutions or compensations).

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention emphasizes the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage during conflicts, as it can play a pacifying role and contribute to the success of peacebuilding efforts (Bülow & Thomas 2023; Aljawabra 2020). During the last decades, UNESCO and other international bodies have highlighted this dimension of CHP (UNESCO & WB 2018; Khalaf 2020). Recovering damaged cultural sites, and returning confiscated artefacts, can lay the foundations for rebuilding trust between the parties (Alsalloum & Brown 2019; Giblin 2014). Furthermore, post-conflict cooperation in the field of CHP provides a platform for dialogue among diverse communities and fosters the growth of a transnational high-skilled workforce – including local professionals, staff of international organisations, representatives of the non-governmental sector, and transnational civil society associations, contributing to the planning and implementation of viable projects of sustainable post-conflict development (Giblin et al 2023).

The past experiences of international community engagement in post-conflict CHP have shown mixed records (Dražeta et al, 2024) and it is proven that such initiatives can also exacerbate divisions if the parties politicise them or if they are ethnically biased (Albert et al., 2022). Therefore, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its Res. 2057 (2015) recommended all concerned Member States to "depoliticise the process of reconstruction of cultural heritage and create the necessary conditions for independent technical committees to work without pressure from political and/or religious authorities, in order to avoid imposing heritage reconstruction policies based on ethnicity and religion and to ensure instead a non-discriminatory and impartial heritage protection regime". The misuse of CHP for political purposes can indeed reduce the chances of reconciliation and pose significant risks of reigniting tensions among different ethnic or religious groups, exacerbating relations between majority and minority groups, stimulating the proliferation of propagandistic and revisionist narratives (Atabay et al 2024; Kisić 2020).

According to recent studies, inclusive and "bottom-up" approaches to post-conflict CHP – sensitive to local narratives and based on community involvement – can play a positive role for

conflict resolution and reconstruction and they are essential for effective reconciliation (Hisari et al 2022; Ringbeck 2022; ICOMOS 2021; Mahfouz 2021). Therefore, establishing non-discriminatory frameworks and encouraging community-led projects are key for ensuring that cultural heritage serves as a tool for sustainable peace and development as well as a driver for social justice in post-conflict societies (Alsalloum & Brown 2019). A careful analysis of case studies showing deficiencies and strengths in policies, practices, and their implications is crucial to envisage possible ways to integrate CHP practices and peacebuilding practices and to develop integrated approaches to protect and recover cultural heritage after conflict (Hammami et al 2022; Barakat 2021; Giliberto & Labadi 2021; Kelly 2021). Designing people-centered actions of CHP entails tackling problems that are relevant to conflict-affected people, improving their quality of life, and opening up spaces for action and opportunities to meaningfully contribute to post-conflict reconstruction (Aljawabra 2020).

In order to design and implement inclusive CHP initiatives, it is fundamental to involve societal actors, to uphold the principles of local ownership and conflict sensitivity, to facilitate the inclusion of minorities and to commit to gender mainstreaming throughout the cycle of heritage assistance interventions: from need assessment to the design, management and implementation of specific initiatives, to the phases of monitoring and evaluation (Davies & True 2022). It is important to highlight, though, that the involvement of non-governmental actors in CHP has its lights and shadows. On the one hand, it can reduce the chances of politicization and weaponization of cultural heritage by governments. On the other hand, it can create business opportunities and a thriving consultancy culture for the NGOs, jeopardizing their ability to remain independent and impartial within post-conflict settings, generating incentives to seek expertise and funds from foreign actors, as well as fuelling competition to increase their influence within international fora such as UNESCO (Meskell & Isakhan 2024; De Cesari 2020).

Ethical aspects of CHP in conflict and post-conflict situations

Political and ethical dilemmas have been arising around issues of CHP, especially in relation to the establishment of international legal instruments: should they be anchored to principles cultural nationalism to cultural internationalism? On the one hand, cultural heritage is often framed as a global public good, and cultural internationalism decouples the value of cultural property from its geographical-sitedness; on the other, international legal instruments are ultimately state-centric: states are bound by international obligations, and state parties are the actors responsible for the national and international protection and preservation of cultural heritage.

While cultural heritage is frequently viewed as a universal good, its protection can raise significant (political and ethical) dilemmas regarding not only the potential for politicization, and the involvement of military actors in preservation efforts (securitisation, militarisation), but also the prioritization of heritage over human life.

Such dilemmas have been arising especially in relation to the establishment of international legal instruments: should they be anchored to principles cultural nationalism to cultural internationalism? On the one hand, cultural heritage is often framed as a global public good, and cultural internationalism decouples the value of cultural property from its geographical-sitedness; on the other, international legal instruments are ultimately state-centric: states are bound by international obligations, and state parties are the actors responsible for the national and international protection and preservation of cultural heritage.

Further, international legal instruments providing for the criminalisation of offences against cultural property and cultural heritage in times of armed conflict introduce a further distinction: that is, a civilian-use approach, prioritizing the safeguarding of civilians (cultural property is protected as a

means of protecting civilians); or a cultural-value approach, premising on the assumption that historical buildings, monuments and works of art deserving of protection "above and beyond their material dimension, precisely because of their cultural value both for the local community and for humanity as a whole" (Frulli 2011). Such "hierarchy of protection" has been contested, putting forward that the destruction of cultural heritage indeed belongs to the repertoire of instances of "expressive violence" against civilians, and that communities cannot survive without material embodiments of their identities (hence the concept of ontological security).

Already in the late 40s, in the context of the preparatory works for the drafting of what was to become the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin elaborated on a dual expression of genocidal violence: barbarism, that is, the annihilation of human collectives through systematic and premeditated destruction, and vandalism, that is, the destruction of the cultural embodiments of those human collectives.

According to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the Blue Shield is to be recognized, in the context of international humanitarian law, as a "functional equivalent" to the emblems ensuring special protection to civilians, medical services and equipment, humanitarian aid and workers (i.e. Red Cross, Red Crescent, Red Crystal), underling the consistency between the protection of civilians and the protection of cultural heritage.

When the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) was established in 1996, its founding organisations (and its current representatives) clarified that the inspiring principle should have been "protect people first", and that cultural heritage should have been protected as it conveys a "sense of place, identity, belonging, wellbeing, and dignity" to people.

However, more recently, the emergence of links between such CHP and the doctrine of "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) spurred contention as it paves the way to military interventions aimed at the creation of "protected cultural zones" (that is, demilitarised zones for the in situ protection of cultural heritage), as well as the establishment of "safe havens'" (that is, refuges for movable cultural heritage), not necessarily called upon by the authorities of the host states. On the other hand, the protection of civilians entails protecting also their memories, collective identities and the places enshrining them.

Despite the abovementioned dilemmas and contentions, CHP has been normally considered as something inherently good and ethical, as it enshrines concerns with human rights and social justice for the affected populations and humankind at large. On the other hand, a debate about the possibility of justifying the international responsibility to respond even with military means to protect cultural heritage, is far from fading away (Frowe & Matravers 2023; Matthes 2018; Weiss & Connelly 2019).

Considering the nexus between protecting cultural property and safeguarding human rights (and minority rights) in conflict situations remains of utmost importance. In addition to such fundamental considerations, reflections related to the possibility that external interventions to protect cultural heritage in armed conflicts place certain cultural sites under the spotlight as strategic and symbolic places to fight for, increasing their potential to become battlefields as well as their exposure to violent acts, vandalism, plundering and looting for illegal smuggling and trafficking of works of art and cultural goods. Moreover, when external interventions imply rescuing and relocating endangered art pieces far from the conflict zones and therefore far from their original sites, CHP may trigger resentments vis-à-vis international organisations and donors, being interpreted as a form of appropriation, orientalism and "cultural protectorates" (Russo and Giusti 2018).

Conclusions and policy recommendations

In conclusion, the scope of CHP goes well beyond preserving artefacts and sites during conflicts or restoring and returning them in post-conflict settings. International organizations, their member states, transnational coalitions … might pursue an CHP agenda for reasons other than preserving a common good of humanity, whose universalistic cultural and symbolic value is intrinsic and self-evident; or humanitarian/human security concerns embracing not only civilians but also their memories, collective identities and the places inspiring them.

The protection of cultural heritage also means:

- intervening in a state's prerogative to designate a certain object or site as "heritage" and to request its protection (i.e. its inclusion in a list of at-risk heritage …);
- gaining access to disputed territories…;
- getting international recognition and legitimation as a cultural heritage protector, i.e. as an international actor committed to the protection of a common good of humanity (Russo and Giusti 2018).

The point above should be taken into consideration when deploying, sponsoring or joining a cultural heritage assistance initiative in third countries, especially if those are in context of fragility, vulnerability or instability. Local interlocutors should be continuously included, and their perceptions, opinions and attitudes gathered and valued. Institutional actors engaged in heritage diplomacy should be juxtaposed to societal, grassroots, community-based actors, in order to avoid replicating exclusionary mechanisms of governance. Finally, the effectiveness and impact of heritage assistance initiatives should be evaluated through empirical, multidisciplinary, site-intensive research to inform conflict-sensitive and data-driven policy schemes and actions.

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Defending Heritage: The European Union's Efforts in Protecting Cultural Heritage in Conflict and Crisis Zones

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While deliberate and systematic attacks on cultural heritage are not new in the history of warfare, their increasing prominence in contemporary conflicts has elevated the protection of cultural heritage (PCH) as a vital component of the international community's efforts in conflict management and resolution. In this context, the concept of "cultural peacekeeping" has emerged as a new mandate for international peace operations (Foradori and Rosa 2017). This process has inevitably involved the European Union (EU), which, since 2003, has been active in crisis management, deploying more than 40 missions and operations overseas under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) across Europe, Africa, and Asia. By applying the theory of "EU actorness," this paper evaluates the extent to which the EU has positioned itself as a PCH actor in conflicts and crises, particularly within the framework of its CSDP. It argues that the EU's role in PCH is emerging but remains limited and niche. However, with enhanced capabilities, aligned expectations, and sustained political commitment, the EU certainly has the potential to develop into a fully-fledged actor in this field.

The "EU actorness" thesis

The concept of "EU actorness" is a prominent and enduring framework in EU studies (Drieskens 2021). It gained traction in the 1990s as the EU expanded its competencies in foreign affairs and has resurfaced in recent years, driven by the reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty and the EU's renewed ambitions to assert itself as a global player. Sjöstedt (1977, 16) defines actorness as the "capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system."

Building on this debate, the methodology employed in this paper draws on the framework established by Cornelius Adebahr in *Europe and Iran: The Nuclear Deal and Beyond* (2017). Adebahr's revised model of EU actorness, expanding on earlier studies, captures both what the EU *is* (actor capability) and what it *does* (actor behaviour). He operationalizes actorness through three key elements: purpose, resources, and relationships. "Purpose" concerns what the actor wants to achieve; "resources" involve the means available to the actor; "relationships" pertain to its position relative to other actors (2017, 11-12).

Assessing EU actorness criteria in PCH

In this section, the above-described actorness model is applied to the EU involvement in PCH in conflicts and crises in order to evaluate the level of development of the EU actorness in policy area.

1. Mandate

Regarding the first element of actorness, *purpose*—what the actor seeks to achieve—the initial criterion to assess is *mandate*, defined as the acceptance, either through formal legal procedures or implicitly, to delegate the representation of the EU's position to an actor or group of actors (Adebahr 2017, p. 12).

Under this definition, the EU's actorness in PCH in terms of mandate appears partially developed. While the EU's powers and competences in culture and cultural heritage remain limited and are primarily determined by Member States as part of their national cultural policies, the EU has increasingly integrated cultural heritage considerations across various policies, including external action and CSDP (de Vries 2020; Jakubowski 2023).

This actorness-building process began with the *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World* (2007). Proposed by the Commission and endorsed by the Council, the document introduced the goal of "the promotion of culture as a vital element in the EU's international relations," to be achieved through the systematic integration of the cultural dimension and various components of culture into all external and development policies, projects, and programs.

This was followed by an intensive exercise of mapping, reflection, and consultation, also prompted by the European Parliament's resolution on the cultural dimensions of the EU's external actions, adopted in May 2011. This resolution called for the development of a common EU strategy on culture in its external relations (European Parliament 2011) and culminated in the 2014 Preparatory Action report (European Union 2014).

In this context, the European Council and the European Commission issued the 2016 Joint Communication *Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations* (European Commission 2016). This document represents a cornerstone of the EU's international cooperation, structuring the Union's approach to culture in foreign affairs and embedding cultural considerations within its external action. The Strategy proposes ways to develop the EU's international cultural relations in order to advance the Union's objectives "to promote international peace and stability, safeguard diversity, and stimulate jobs and growth" (ibid., 2) and "contribute to making the EU a stronger global actor" (ibid., 3) To that end, the document proposes a three pillars approach: 1) unlocking the potential of culture and creativity for sustainable social and economic development; 2) promoting peace and fighting radicalization through intercultural dialogue; 3) strengthening cooperation on cultural heritage.

In the specific context of the EU's CSDP, the notion of PCH first emerged in 2017 during discussions on the Civilian CSDP Compact (Pietz and Schmidtke 2019).[1] Notably, in 2018, the Council granted the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq) a specific mandate for cultural heritage protection, resulting in the appointment of a full-time PCH advisor. [2] Even without formal PCH mandates, related tasks are carried out *de facto* by other civilian CSDP missions or integrated into their operational plans. For example, EUAM Ukraine, EUBAM Libya, EUBAM Rafah, and EUMM Georgia have actively assisted their host countries in enhancing their capacities to preserve and protect cultural heritage (EEAS 2023).

A significant milestone in establishing a more explicit and expanded EU role in PCH was achieved with the negotiation, drafting, and publication of the *Concept on cultural heritage in conflicts and crises. A component for peace and security in European Union's external action* (19 April 2021), authored by the EEAS and approved in the Council's *Conclusions on EU Approach to Cultural Heritage in Conflicts and Crises* (21 June 2021). These documents—referred to hereafter as the "Concept" and the "Conclusions"—formally recognized cultural heritage as part of the EU's foreign

[1] Of note, the 2016 "Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy" identified cultural diplomacy as a new field for joined-up external action.

[2] European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq: https://www.euam-iraq.eu.

policy toolbox, including the CSDP, and provided EU institutions and officials with a clearly defined political and operational framework.

In 2022, the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* reaffirmed that the EU "will continue to contribute to the protection of cultural heritage, including through our CSDP missions and operations" (European Union 2022). The revised 2023 Civilian CSDP Compact further emphasized the need to intensify efforts to preserve and protect cultural heritage (Council 2023).

Despite these positive developments and the EU's growing recognition of the importance of cultural heritage for peace and security, its actorness in terms of mandate remains incomplete. Member States' reluctance to delegate responsibilities to the EU presents a significant barrier. Given culture's deep ties to national identity, it remains a complex and contentious issue, prompting Member States to protect their prerogatives and significantly restrict EU competences (Littoz-Monnet 2013).

The aspiration of former HR/VP Federica Mogherini to include PCH mandates in all EU civilian and military missions also remains unfulfilled, with only EUAM Iraq possessing a formal PCH mandate. Moreover, although the *Concept* acknowledges that both CSDP missions and operations can play a crucial role in protecting cultural heritage in conflict and crisis zones, CSDP military operations have resisted expanding their mandates to include PCH, with none having adopted such a mandate as of this writing. Even in the case of EUAM Iraq, the explicit PCH mandate is limited, existing as a component of a broader Security Sector Reform (SSR) framework. As such, it plays a subordinate and ancillary role relative to the Mission's primary objectives of enhancing security, institutional stability, and combating organized crime.

2. Policy

The second dimension of *purpose* is *policy*, which Adebahr describes as "a decision based on Article 25 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) or any other procedural and substantive agreement among member states" (2017, 12). Beyond this formal definition, this aspect of actorness, influenced by Jupille and Caporaso's (1998) concept of "cohesion," primarily concerns the capacity to formulate and articulate internally consistent policy preferences.

Given this expanded definition, progress in the EU's policy development has been significant, demonstrating the Union's ability to articulate a clearly defined and coherent policy framework for intervention in PCH in conflicts and crises.

This was primarily achieved through the elaboration of the *Concept* of 19 April 2021 and the related Council's *Conclusions* of 21 June 2021, which led the EEAS to conclude that "the EU has integrated the topic of cultural heritage into the political framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)" (EEAS 2021).

These documents represent the first comprehensive effort to address heritage protection within the EU's CFSP, including the CSDP. They have laid the foundation for the EU's actions and priorities in this area, marking a significant shift in the integration of cultural heritage into the EU's external policies. Their adoption plays a crucial role in the EU's strategic approach to the culture-security-development nexus.

The Concept provides the policy foundation for the EU's engagement in PCH, elaborating on the principles, operational, and strategic approaches that guide actions throughout the entire conflict cycle. The rationale for EU engagement in PCH is both clear and ambitious. As the subtitle of the

Concept emphasizes, protecting cultural heritage is a “component of peace and security in the European Union’s external action."

An important innovation of the Concept is its novel approach to cultural heritage, shifting the perspective from viewing it merely as a vulnerable asset in need of safeguarding to recognizing it as a catalyst for peace and development (Hausler 2021). As a powerful and complementary component in revitalizing the EU's approach to peace, security, and development, cultural heritage can be both a driver of conflict and a vector for peace, reconciliation, and development, thereby supporting the EU in addressing conflicts and crises. Furthermore, cultural heritage can foster socio-economic sustainability by creating jobs, enhancing economic livelihoods, and contributing to long-term development and environmental stability.

The Concept outlines a comprehensive operational framework aligned with the EU's integrated approach to peace and security. It emphasizes the importance of considering cultural heritage across all phases of conflicts and crises—prevention, crisis response, stabilization, and long-term peacebuilding and recovery. Guided by an inclusive, equitable, and non-discriminatory policy, the framework prioritizes local ownership and places the needs and participation of local communities at the forefront of these efforts.

In pursuit of this goal, the Concept establishes guiding principles for EU action, including promoting international legal frameworks, fostering partnerships and multilateralism, ensuring coherence across EU policies, supporting multi-track approaches with national and local ownership, empowering women and youth, maintaining conflict sensitivity, linking tangible and intangible heritage, and integrating climate change considerations into cultural protection.

Although the Concept and related Council Conclusions represent a significant policy advancement by elevating cultural heritage as a key component of the EU's foreign and security policy, integrating it into conflict and crisis management within the CSDP, challenges remain.

Firstly, the ambitious attempts to mainstream PCH a cross-cutting issue, akin to human rights, across all aspects of EU external policy and specifically in all CSDP missions and operations, have not materialized yet. PCH activities, when conducted, often remain a niche, specialized, and technical effort, subordinated to primary mandated initiatives and not fully integrated into broader peace and security policies. Secondly, translating the ambitions and principles of the Concept into actual action remains a complex endeavour. CSDP's direct involvement in cultural heritage protection is still limited in its objectives, scope, and resources. Thirdly, the implementation of the Concept often falls short of reflecting its conceptual sophistication. In the case of EUAM Iraq, as already noted, the protection of cultural heritage is predominantly framed within the conventional context of combating organized crime and terrorist financing (Pietz and Schmidtke 2019, 4). This “securitized” approach contrasts with the more innovative framework outlined in the Concept, limiting the potential of cultural heritage to serve more effectively as a tool for peacebuilding, reconciliation, and development. Fourthly, the Concept insufficiently addresses one of the defining crises of our time: climate change (Hausler 2021, 100). Acknowledging this connection is essential for developing comprehensive strategies that address the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change while simultaneously safeguarding cultural heritage.

3. Apparatus

In examining the element of *resources* (the means available to the actor), the first aspect to consider is the apparatus, defined as the actor's control over administrative and diplomatic structures that

enable it to represent the EU's position independently from individual member states (Adebahr 2017, 12).

Applying this criterion to the EU's role in PCH within the CSDP reveals limited progress. Despite its growth potential, the sector remains underdeveloped and lacks the critical mass needed for significant impact. In both Brussels and operational areas, administrative and operational frameworks are niche, with limited resources and few dedicated personnel.

A key player is the Peace, Partnerships and Crisis Management Directorate (PCM), which coordinates and manages the EEAS's contribution to the EU Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises, combining security, development and diplomatic actions. Notably, Division PCM1 (Integrated Approach for Peace and Security), includes among its Thematic Expertise and Tools a responsibility for "Cultural Heritage in Conflicts and Crisis", aimed at supporting the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones to foster peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion.[3] The Division is staffed with one Cultural Heritage Policy Officer, seconded by a Member State.

PCM1 oversees an inter-service Task Force of the various EU actors and agencies involved in cultural heritage protection in conflicts and crises. This Task Force brings together experts from the EEAS and relevant Commission services, leveraging their expertise and thematic competence to develop knowledge products. Its responsibilities include monitoring the outcomes of cultural heritage initiatives, drawing lessons and identifying good practices. The Task Force drafts the implementation reports on the 2021 Concepts.

A key institutional development within the CSDP was the appointment in 2023 of a Policy Officer on Cultural Heritage within the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC), the Brussels-based headquarters overseeing all civilian CSDP missions. Additionally, PCH "Focal Points" have been designated in 8 of the 14 CSDP missions currently deployed.

Only EUAM Iraq has been assigned a dedicated full-time expert on cultural heritage protection. However, throughout its six-year existence, only one expert has been deployed at a time, significantly limiting the Mission's capacity to make a strong impact on Iraq's rich and vast cultural heritage.

Another notable recent development was the establishment in 2024 of the Working Party (WP) of Foreign Relations Counsellors (RELEX), Horizontal Questions - International Cultural Relations. This initiative aims to elevate the importance of cultural relations and heritage protection within the EU's agenda, advocating for a structured approach that integrates cultural considerations into broader diplomatic and policy frameworks. While its precise role and impact have yet to be fully assessed, the WP is expected to help institutionalize the EU's commitment to cultural heritage protection, ensuring continuity and more firmly integrating this objective into the EU's administrative and diplomatic framework.

In summary, while the EU's PCH apparatus and institutional framework remain limited in size, some progress has been made in expanding them in the relatively short time since PCH was integrated into EU external action. To sustain these achievements and ensure continued progress, however, it is essential to institutionalize these gains, making cultural heritage protection a permanent and integral part of the EU's strategic objectives and operational frameworks. The difficulty in recruting adequate resources and personnel in Brussels and particularly in operational fields, remains a critical issue. The availability of qualified personnel remains severely limited. The specialized expertise required for

[3] See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/peace-partnerships-and-crisis-management-directorate-–-pcm_en

these roles necessitates professionals with highly specific competencies that are difficul to find. Currently, only some six to eight EU countries possess military and law enforcement units specifically trained and equipped for cultural heritage protection. This scarcity significantly hampers recruitment efforts and the adequate staffing of CSPD missions and operations.

4. Instruments

In addition to the institutional apparatus, the second dimension necessary to identify the means available to the actor for actual action is *instruments*, defined as policy resources employed by the EU in its external relations, including diplomatic, economic, and military measures (Adebahr 2017, 12).

Progress in actorness-building can be observed in the application of this criterion. The EEAS has published two reports assessing the implementation of the Concept since its adoption in 2021, drawing on data from the EEAS, European Commission Services, EU Delegations, and EU CSDP civilian and military missions. These reports highlight the extensive array of instruments and policy resources the EU can mobilize during crises and conflicts (EEAS 2022; EEAS 2023).

In the CSDP domain, several civilian missions, as mentioned above, are actively involved in tasks related to cultural heritage, even without explicit mandates. EUMM Georgia continues to incorporate cultural heritage aspects into its monitoring activities, while EUBAM Libya provided training on protecting cultural heritage for local authorities and law enforcement agencies in 2022.

Regarding the specific instruments and policy resources utilized by the EUAM Iraq, they include:

- *Strategic Advising*: providing advise and guidance to Iraqi authorities, including the Ministry of Culture, the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), the Ministry of Interior, and the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA).
- *Training*: offering specialized training to SBAH and law enforcement agencies, focusing on combating organized crime and illicit trafficking.
- *Public Education and Awareness Campaigns*: raising awareness among youth and police about the importance of cultural heritage protection and promoting a positive image of community-oriented policing.
- *Legislation Development*: supporting the Ministry of Education and Iraqi universities in establishing a "think tank" of legal experts to review and enhance Iraqi law 55/2002 related to cultural heritage protection.
- *Community Engagement*: collaborating with local communities and civil society organizations to preserve Iraq's tangible and intangible cultural assets.
- *Capacity-Building*: developing a national IT system for a Cultural Heritage Protection Database to improve capabilities in investigating culturally related crimes, combat international illicit trafficking, and recover stolen goods.
- *Institutional Capacity-Building*: promoting inter-ministerial and inter-departmental cooperation by strengthening relationships between cultural and law enforcement stakeholders.
- *International cooperation*: facilitating cooperation among international cultural stakeholders by organizing workshops on anti-organized crime, counter-terrorism, and border management, involving experts from UNESCO, INTERPOL, the Italian Carabinieri (Cultural Heritage Protection Unit), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), etc. alongside senior Iraqi officials.

In addition to EUAM activities, the EU Delegation supports Iraqi authorities through initiatives like the "Job Creation in the Rehabilitation of Old Cities of Mosul and Basra" project (2019-2024), funded with a budget of 20 million euros and implemented by UNESCO. This project, part of the "Reviving the Spirit of Mosul and Basra" initiative, aims to promote social cohesion, job creation, and reconciliation by restoring historic urban landscapes while also fostering economic recovery and supporting small and medium enterprises in the cultural and creative sectors.

Despite these positive developments, limitations persist. A key challenge is the EU's inability to coordinate the efforts of multiple EU stakeholders involved in PCH and to integrate the different instruments and tools at their disposal. This hampers synergy, leads to duplication, and limits overall impact

5. Self-presentation

The element of *relationships* refers to how aspiring actors position themselves relative to others, particularly through self-presentation. This process helps define their role by articulating perceptions and self-conceptions. Adebahr (2017) defines self-presentation as an actor's recognition that its position is shaped by European interests and that it engages with other powers on behalf of the EU.

Measured by this criterion, the EU's actorness in PCH is well developed. The Union has strengthened its self-presentation as a key player, with culture increasingly seen as integral to its foreign policy and a driver of global influence. The Commission highlights this, stating, "Culture is the hidden gem of our foreign policy. It promotes dialogue, mutual understanding, and long-term relationships, making the EU a stronger global actor" (European Commission 2016).

In shaping the EU's self-presentation as a PCH actor, three elements must be considered.

First, European cultural heritage is considered crucial in forming a collective sense of belonging among Europeans (Delanty 2018). The EU sees culture and its protection as central to integration, promoting shared identity, solidarity, and social cohesion while respecting diversity (Puskás 2024). As the European Commission states, "Culture lies at the heart of the European project, anchoring 'unity in diversity' and ensuring peace, prosperity, and solidarity." Second, the EU positions itself as a significant cultural power with much to contribute globally. EU's self-perception is that of "a continent rich in cultural heritage, and vibrant creative forces". As a global cultural champion, the EU views its cultural richness and diversity as closely tied to its role and influence in the world. As the Commission puts it, "The European Union is not just an economic process or a trading power, it is already widely - and accurately - perceived as an unprecedented and successful social and cultural project. The EU is, and must aspire to become even more, an example of a "soft power […] for the world of tomorrow" (European Commission 2007, 12). Third, the EU presents itself as a value-driven, neutral, altruistic, and non-predatory actor committed to preserving and promoting global cultural heritage. In the context of Iraq, for instance, the EU is deemed as a "benevolent" player with a well-intentioned agenda, contrasting with perceptions of the United States (Al Rachid and Ghanem 2023, 2).

6. Recognition

The final criterion for *relations* is recognition, described as "the sine qua non of global actorhood" by Jupille and Caporaso (1998, 215). Recognition concerns the perception by third parties that the EU is, or should be, an actor in a specific policy domain. Adebahr (2017, 12) further clarifies that recognition exists when the EU's representative is formally part of a multilateral group or at least informally interacts with third states and non-state actors on behalf of all member states.

Given this definition, evidence indicates that the EU has only been partially recognized and accepted as a distinct and credible actor in PCH in conflicts and crises.

A key issue is the reluctance of Member States (MS) to grant the EU a strong and independent role in cultural heritage protection. MSs assert control over cultural heritage as part of their sovereign competences, delegating responsibility to the EU only when it complements or enhances national policies rather than competing with their interests (Schunz and Trobbiani 2019; Foradori et al. 2018).

At the EU level, despite increasing awareness among EU institutions regarding the importance of integrating PCH into external action for peace and security, this policy area continues to be perceived as a niche sector with limited significance and low priority. As MacDonald and Vlaeminck (2020) point out, it remains uncertain whether culture can genuinely be considered an integral component of European foreign policy, as envisioned by the EEAS in the 2016 cultural strategy.

More critically, the EU's role as a cultural actor is often insufficiently recognized by authorities and cultural stakeholders in host countries where the Union's external policy is implemented and CSDP missions and operations are deployed. In these contexts, the EU is frequently perceived as a minor and not unitary actor.

A long history of bilateral cultural cooperation, especially in areas like archaeology, undermines the EU's ability to adopt an integrated and comprehensive approach. This legacy fosters enduring ties between host countries and individual EU member states, which makes it challenging to achieve policy synergies and limits the EU's visibility on the international stage.

This tendency is further compounded by the complexity of the EU's operational framework, that often leaves host countries interacting with multiple EU interlocutors and instruments, each with distinct rules and timelines. Differentiating between EU-led initiatives and those by individual MSs remains challenging, creating ambiguity around roles and responsibilities. Indeed, despite efforts toward greater integration, the EU largely continues to operate in a fragmented manner (de Vries 2020, 134).

Conclusions

The analysis indicates that while the EU has made steady progress as an actor in protecting cultural heritage during conflicts and crises under the CSDP framework, it has not yet achieved full actorness in this domain. Although there are clear signs of advancement, the EU's involvement in this policy area can be characterized as a "partial and complementary" form of actorness.

The EU performs relatively well in two out of six actorness criteria: policy and self-presentation. It has established a well-developed and coherent policy framework, particularly through the 2021 Concept, and has cultivated a strong self-image as a benevolent global "cultural power," capable of contributing to the safeguarding of cultural heritage worldwide. However, it falls short in terms of mandate, which is only partially defined, and lacks the necessary institutional apparatus to effectively fulfill its new responsibilities. Although the EU has a diverse array of intervention instruments for cultural heritage protection, they are not always effective or impactful, and challenges persist in coordinating and integrating efforts among various EU actors and MSs. Furthermore, the EU has yet to gain sufficient recognition from third parties, as both EU MSs and host countries do not fully embrace its emerging role in this policy area.

The "expectations-capabilities gap" in the EU's PCH performance identified by Pietz and Schmidtke in 2019 remains open. As MacDonald and Vlaeminck rightly argue, "a narrative has been developed, it has been shared to some extent, assertions are made, information is supplied, there are routine processes where discussions take place. Much, however, needs to be done to close the gap between all this and anything that can be described as effective action" (2020, 58-59).

The longstanding and deeply rooted reluctance of MSs to relinquish their prerogatives and competencies remains especially hard to overcome. Culture remains a sensitive and contested domain—a tension that has intensified with the recent rise of nationalism and populism across the European Union (Higgott and Proud, 2020).

To close the gap and make further progress in actorness-buidling, it is crucial to institutionalize and consolidate the advancements made in recent years. If these efforts are not properly institutionalized, there is a significant danger that this valuable momentum could be lost.

Enhancing capabilities by allocating additional resources to the weaker components of actorness is essential. This requires a stronger, more coherent, and higher-performing institutional framework, including adequate financial means and personnel. Equally crucial is the effective integration of all available instruments, which otherwise risk remaining underutilized, weak and unable to deliver meaningful impact. The EU can maximize its impact by fostering greater collaboration across sectors, with considerable potential for a more integrated approach through the full incorporation of technical, economic, military, political, civilian and diplomatic tools. This approach would enhance the EU's capacity to address cultural heritage protection more holistically and strategically, empowering it to respond more effectively to challenges and opportunities in this vital area.

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Cultural Heritage Protection in Conflict and Post-Conflict Contexts – Challenges and Opportunities for Diplomacy

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Introduction

In March 2022, the Italian government established the "Blue Helmets for Culture" Task Force, an operational unit designed to intervene in areas affected by emergencies, such as natural disasters or human-made crises, to safeguard cultural heritage sites and objects, and fight against the illicit trafficking and smuggling of cultural goods. Based on a specific agreement, the Task Force can intervene under the auspices of UNESCO using the designation "Italian Task Force by invitation of UNESCO", as agreed during the G20 Culture held in Rome in late July 2021.

Cultural heritage is a key tile in the complex mosaic of the Italian national interest. Already in 1969, Carabinieri's Unit for the Protection of Cultural Heritage was established, paving the way to the emergence and crystallization of the concept of "crime against cultural heritage. Years later, the Italian Parliament approved Law 45/2009, which ratified the second protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict. More recently (since 2015), a renewed emphasis on the importance of protecting, restoring, and preserving cultural heritage at the global level has led Italy to assert leadership in this field. The Milan Expo, and particularly the international conference of Ministers of Culture, was a significant opportunity to reaffirm Italy's activism, such as by promoting a declaration (signed by 83 countries) on the value of cultural heritage as a channel for cooperation and dialogue.

Similarly, Italy's input to shape the concept of "cultural peacebuilding", and the integration of a cultural component in the mandates of international missions in crisis and conflict contexts, led to the development, in 2016, of a memorandum of understanding with UNESCO for the creation of a Unite4Heritage Task Force, supported by the Turin-based International Training and Research Centre on the Economics of Culture and World Heritage. Subsequently, in 2017, within the framework of the first G7 on Culture (Florence), Italy promoted a call, later adopted by UNESCO - titled "Protecting Culture and Promoting Cultural Pluralism: The Key to Lasting Peace" (Foradori and Rosa 2017; Foradori 2017; Foradori, Giusti, Lamonica 2018).

On a more "technical" level, Italy is internationally considered a key place for heritage professionals to be trained (Institute for Conservation and Restoration with its respective International Training Projects); moreover, each year the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation supports with financial and human resources several archaeological missions across a number of countries.

Italy's international commitment to supporting the protection of cultural heritage became even more significant since 2022, in the context of the war in Ukraine. In such turbulent times, it is relevant to consider how cultural heritage protection has been enacted, historically and in contemporary conflicts, to consolidate and relaunch these actions even more effectively, credibly, and with international legitimacy.

Protecting cultural heritage is not a politically neutral field of action, indeed, nor cultural heritage only enshrines positive externalities such as socio-political reconciliation and economic recovery. If not devised according to a well-thought approach, the protection of cultural heritage may reveal some criticalities, especially if external actors intervene. This is even more likely in contexts where cultural sites and goods are subjects to contention and contestation, multiple stakeholders coexist, overlap and promote conflicting agendas, as well as the valorisation of cultural heritage has to do with processes of legitimation (of identities, foundational myths and histories, collective memories), commodification, securitisation.

Premising on this assumption, the paper reviews three cases from EU's neighbourhood and enlargement areas where conflicts endanger(ed) cultural heritage and the international community tried to respond, with different degree of consistency and efficacy.

Thirty years after the Dayton Peace Agreement, we decided to include the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina: the accords included a commitment to protect cultural heritage, that during the war was subject to extensive episodes of destruction (the shelling of the Mostar bridge and its reconstruction have assumed over time a highly evocative value…).

A few months before the Ukraine Recovery Conference, to be held in Rome in July 2025, we considered timely and relevant to include the case of Ukraine - also considering the importance of cultural heritage reconstruction in the mandate of Italy's Special Envoy for the Reconstruction of Ukraine.

Thirdly, the inclusion of the case of Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno Karabakh appears to be an ideal fit, in consideration of the recent rapprochement of Armenia to the European Union, of the post-2023 change of the situation on the ground as well as of the central role that cultural heritage management has been playing in conflict-related dynamics during the last decades.

With reference to the most current cases analysed, that is, Ukraine and Nagorno Karabakh, the report maps how different actors, both local and international (i.e. institutions and organisations) have reacted to the destruction of cultural heritage and activated mechanisms to save, rescue, protect or promote the reconstruction of the affected sites. The mapping covers actions undertaken until December 2024.

We have covered these cases with the eyes of political scientists more than with those of cultural heritage experts: understanding the specific socio-political context in which both the destruction of cultural heritage and reconstruction initiatives take place has been at the core of our analysis, in addition to mapping the distribution of (material and symbolic-narrative) resources and the involvement of international and local actors. The analysis has benefitted from two research trips, respectively in Yerevan and Sarajevo, in the context of which we have conducted several interviews with local interlocutors (practitioners, representatives of national institutions, of NGOs and civil society associations, CHP activists), carried out observations at specific events and visited relevant cultural sites.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

This section looks at cultural heritage and memory in a country who experienced a conflict driven by ethnic exclusivism, where cultural and religious aspects were systematically targeted in the pursuit of mono-ethnic spaces. The conflict in Bosnia Herzegovina was also characterized by an enormous foreign humanitarian and military intervention, both during and after the conflict itself. The Dayton Peace Agreement not only tried to recreate the historical pluralism of the country, but guaranteed legal protection to cultural heritage. The agreement's Annex 8, in particular, establishes the

Commission to Preserve National Monuments as a commitment to protect cultural and historical heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina[4]. Yet despite all this, the restoration and rebuilding of cultural and religious property was part of a difficult, long-drawn-out, often violently contested process (Walasek 2019).

The wars that have accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia with violent conflicts taking place in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo were the culmination of years of nationalist rhetoric and propaganda that mobilized the past and emphasized perceived ethno-nationalism and ethno-religious differences. Slobodan Milošević's propaganda in particular stressed on the fear of an existential threat to Serbs, particularly from Muslims, and insisted on the need to live separately. It was during the war in Croatia that cultural heritage first became a target. The Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslovenska narodna armija, JNA) bombarded the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Dubrovnik in 1991. Later, between 1992 and 1995, many cultural and religious properties were purposefully destructed, leading Walasek (2019, p.275) to define this devastation as the "greatest destruction of cultural heritage in Europe since the Second World War".

The attacks on iconic monuments such as the burning of Sarajevo's Austro-Hungarian era National Library (Vijećnica) in 1992 by Bosnian Serb forces, and the destruction of Mostar's sixteenth-century Ottoman Old Bridge (Stari Most) in 1993 by Bosnian Croat forces are two examples of symbols of the diverse pan-Bosnian identity, targeted by separatist troops (Walasek 2019). Walasek (2019) explains how the intentionality to destroy the Bosnian identity was verbalized by perpetrators themselves. During his testimony at the ICTY, a wartime chief of the Bosnian Serb-held municipality of Sokolac, where all the mosques were demolished over a few days in 1992, explained: "There's a belief among the Serbs that if there are no mosques, there are no Muslims and by destroying the mosques, the Muslims will lose a motive to return to their villages."[5] According to Arnautovic (2010), by the end of the war, with one exception, not a single minaret on a functioning mosque was left intact on territories occupied by Bosnian Serb forces. While many of the mosques destroyed were of little architectural value, some of them had valuable items, such as Islamic manuscripts and carpets donated by religious members over the centuries (Walasek 2019). Moreover, religious institutions, whatever their architectural or heritage values, have an additional spiritual value for an entire community that needs to be taken into account when considering the depth of the harm committed when such structures are demolished (Brammertz et al 2016).

Cultural heritage management in Bosnia and Herzegovina has undergone significant changes since the war in the 1990s. Before the conflict, national authorities were directly responsible for overseeing and maintaining cultural heritage sites, ensuring their preservation and upkeep. However, this role diminished following the Dayton Agreement, which decentralized governance and shifted responsibilities to the entities and cantons. Article 8 of the National Commission for the Preservation of National Monuments established guidelines for protecting heritage, but the lack of a central Ministry of Culture has left a gap in cohesive policy and funding. This fragmentation has hindered the development of a unified approach to cultural heritage, complicating efforts to safeguard sites that are vital to the country's historical and cultural identity. There is in particular a stark contrast in the prioritization and preservation of cultural heritage tied to different periods of the country's history. While memorials and museums linked to the Bosnian War of the 1990s are generally well-maintained

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[4] https://www.europeanheritagehub.eu/document/the-general-framework-agreement-for-peace-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-dayton-peace-agreement-annex-8-agreement-on-the-commission-to-preserve-national-monuments/

[5] Tupajić was testifying at the ICTY. See ICTY, Krajišnik, Case No. IT-00-39-T, 29 June 2005, p. 15431, available at: www.icty.org/x/cases/krajisnik/trans/en/050629IT.htm

and actively promoted, those associated with earlier conflicts, such as World War II, often face neglect and decay.

Contrasting legacies: the preservation of Bosnian war memorials vs. neglect of World War II monuments

Museums and memorials linked to the Bosnian War are generally well-maintained and receive significant attention, such as in the case of the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which a part of the permanent collection is devoted to "Besieged Sarajevo" as well as the experiences of displacement ("We, Refugees"). In Sarajevo's city centre, private galleries and exhibitions dedicated to the war and its aftermath are prominently displayed and war ruins have become key spots of dark tourism (i.e. Gallery 11/07/95, Ratni muzej - War Museum 1992 Sarajevo, Museum of crimes against humanity and genocide, Siege of Sarajevo Museum, Sarajevo War Tunnel and Museum). International and local tourist agency highlights genocide memorials and war-related museums as some of the top-rated attractions to visit in Sarajevo and even organise themed tours (i.e. "Times of Misfortune" tour). The so-called Sarajevo Roses, that is, the traces of the damages that mortar shell's explosions made to the city, have been part of this process of marketisation/commodification of the collective trauma of war, but, at the same time, part of a local, everyday process of memorialisation. Already in 1996, the Executive Committee of the city of Sarajevo launched an initiative to mark them; in 2024, the Institute for Protection of Cultural-Historical and Natural Heritage of the Sarajevo Canton published a map of both painted and unpainted Roses.

An interesting place it is worth to mention is the War Childhood Museum, inaugurated in 2017, founded and directed by Jasminko Halilović, and that has quickly gained significant recognition and success, and supported by a range of international donors, including the National Endowment for Democracy, Sweden, the German Embassy Fund, the UK Embassy to BiH, the Italian Embassy to BiH, the EU Delegation to BiH, the French Embassy to BiH, the Embassy of the Slovak Republic Sarajevo, the Embassy of the United States in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Council of Europe. The museum aims at drawing both local and international visitors who are interested on the experiences of children affected by war. During our visit, we noticed that the museum offers an intimate glimpse into their lives through a collection of personal items, stories, and multimedia exhibits. Each object on display—a toy, a letter, a photograph—carries a narrative, immersing visitors in the emotional realities of being a child or a teenager during conflict. The museum's layout is carefully curated, fostering an atmosphere of reflection and empathy.

In contrast to the sites mentioned above, those associated with World War II are often neglected and rarely visited, with little effort to preserve their relevance or draw public interest. Many of these monuments have fallen into disrepair, some remaining closed for years, leaving them dilapidated and largely forgotten, with no compelling reason for people to visit. We visited the Vraca Memorial Park (Spomen-park Vraca) on Mount Trebević, overlooking Sarajevo. Designed in the 1960s by architects Vladimir Dobrović and Aleksandar Maltarić, along with sculptor Alija Kučukalić, the monument was constructed to honor the Yugoslav Partisans who fought against fascism during World War II. It serves as a tribute to the fighters and victims of fascism from Sarajevo and the surrounding area. The memorial suffers neglect and vandalism: many of its inscriptions are defaced, scattered trash, and an overall sense of abandonment as if it had not been visited for a long time.

Cultural heritage and resilience: international efforts and stakeholders

While it seemed that the restoration and preservation of the country's destroyed and damaged historic monuments and religious buildings should have taken place within the framework of the Annex 8 of

the Dayton Agreement, the international community played a key role in heritage restoration in the first ten post-conflict years. International actor focused on a small number of high-profile projects, including the UNESCO-coordinated restoration of Mostar and the Old Bridge. The bridge was promoted as a visible symbol of the ideas of reconciliation that the international community was keen to promote in the aftermath of the war.

International actors, including US private organizations, the Aga Khan Foundation, the Turkish organization Irsika, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) have been and continue to be at the forefront of sponsoring cultural heritage projects aimed at fostering resilience and peace. On the other hand, our interviews often pointed to the consideration that international donors feared to become involved in restoration or rebuilding projects in Republika Srpska or in locations in the Federation where there was strident opposition from hostile and deeply entrenched ethnonational power structures. Limitations to reconstruction and preservation of cultural heritage have arisen. For example, the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka went through a lengthy process of renovation, as many of the stones from the original building were used in the reconstruction of residential buildings. They had been removed from riverbeds and dug up from trash dumps by Bosnian Serb militiamen who wanted to purge the city of all reminders of its Muslim past. Only the foundation stones and the wooden pilings remained after bulldozers destroyed the site[6].

In spite of these limitations, cultural heritage has also represented a field of active engagement by civil society associations. For example, Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHWB), was founded in 1999 and exemplifies Sweden's efforts to integrate CH into humanitarian aid. CHWB's initiatives included youth restoration camps and the establishment of the Balkan Museum Network, which now connects over 80 museums.

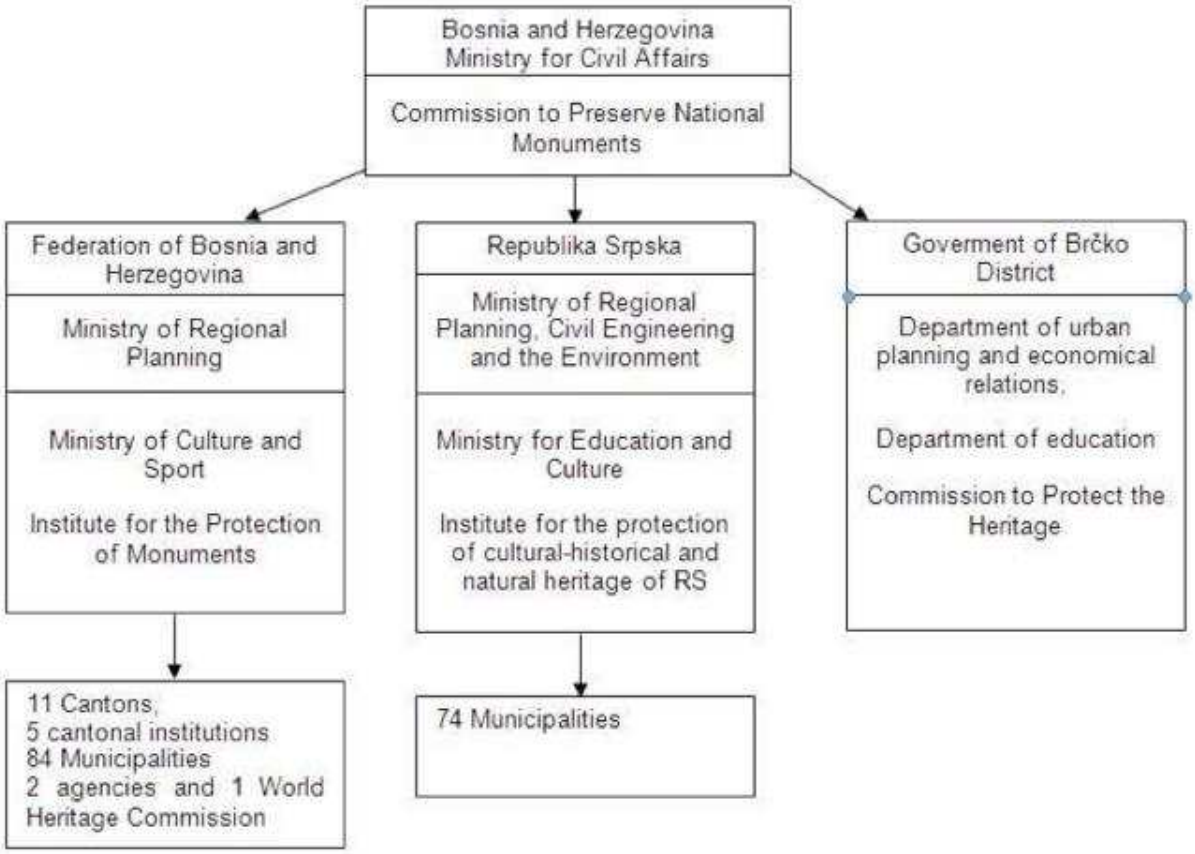
Fragmented governance and cultural heritage preservation

At the national level, the Commission to Preserve National Monuments (hereinafter: the Commission) is the main institution responsible for both heritage protection and international cooperation in the field. It was set up by the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Decision of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Commission to Preserve National Monuments[7].

[6] See also: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/06/banja-luka-mosque-bosnia-herzegovina-serbia-reopens-reconstruction

[7] The Decision of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Commission to Preserve National Monuments, 2001.

Administrative structure of heritage management in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source https://www.coe.int/en/web/herein-system/bosnia-and-herzegovina

As governance is decentralized, cultural heritage management suffers from fragmentation. 13 separate ministries indeed oversee culture at the entity, canton, and Brčko district levels, coordinated by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which has limited authority. The Ministry of Civil Affairs is responsible for prescribing the basic principles of the coordination of activities, harmonizing the plans of the entity authorities and defining strategy at the international level.

The Governments of the Federation, the Republika Srpska and Brcko District are responsible for providing the legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures for the protection, conservation, restoration and preservation of national monuments. Efforts to establish a unified cultural heritage framework have been blocked by nationalist parties, who argue that each national group should independently safeguard its heritage. This disjointed approach, compounded by the lack of prioritization in national monuments - summed up by the phrase of an interviewee "if everything is important, nothing is important" - undermines cohesive cultural heritage preservation efforts.

Community-driven cultural heritage preservation and the challenges of post-conflict restoration

At the meso-level, several actors, including mayors, local NGOs, associations, and veterans, play a role in cultural heritage management. However, local communities often struggle to manage national monuments due to strict regulations and a lack of funding, leading to poor maintenance. Despite these challenges, there have been some successes. For instance, the Vratza - a residential building where

people still live - highlights the importance of engaging residents in preserving and maintaining their heritage.

The small but strategically important town of Foča also provides a compelling example of cultural heritage restoration in post-conflict settings. Located to the east of Sarajevo, near the Montenegrin border, the town had a Muslim-majority population at the start of the conflict. Consequently, important examples of classical Ottoman architecture were present in Foča, including the Aladža Mosque. Some of the war's worst atrocities were committed in this town against Muslims by Bosnian Serb forces and their allies, including the systematic rape of women and girls. Entire Muslim neighbourhoods and all the town's mosques had been attacked and the last intact mosque standing in town, the Aladža Mosque, was blown up in a huge explosion on the night of 2–3 August 1992, months after Bosnian Serb authorities had established complete control over the town (Walasek 2019). According to a ICTY report, fragments of the Aladža Mosque were discovered by a team from the Federation Commission on Missing Persons excavating a mass grave site in Foča in 2000[8]. The post-war restoration of the Aladža Mosque only began in 2014 and was part of a complicated process. Architects working on the mosque's reconstruction faced hostility from the local community, which contested and resisted their presence in town. Eventually, police protection was provided by the mayor to ensure the restoration project could have proceeded. This reconstruction was part of a broader project, funded by the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, and was completed in mid-2019, demonstrating the complexities and potential of cultural heritage restoration in divided communities. As an interviewee from an international organisation pointed out, while it is a frequent claim of the international community in Bosnia-Herzegovina that the reconstruction and restoration of cultural heritage destroyed or damaged during the conflict would lead inevitably to reconciliation, there is little evidence to support this assertion in the short term. In settings like Foča, the restoration of religious and cultural symbols has been violently contested, as the behaviour of the local community towards the architects of the Aladža Mosque shows.

Ukraine

Already before 2022, Ukraine's cultural heritage has been endangered by the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the Russian Federation. A number of cultural institutions found themselves in exile since 2014-2015, cases of illegal looting of cultural objects and/or their transfer out of Ukrainian territory (i.e. the paintings by Ivan Aivazovsky) increased and several works of art were removed especially from the museums located in Sevastopol and Simferopol.

The process of appropriation of Crimean cultural heritage by the Russian Federation has been documented by UNESCO, whose Executive Board for example highlighted that in October 2015 the government of the Russian Federation adopted an order to attribute federal ownership to an important heritage complex in Sevastopol, classifying it as an instance of cultural heritage of federal significance, including it into the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites. Subsequently, in December 2015, a presidential decree was issued to include it in the so-called "List of special value cultural heritage objects of the peoples of the Russian Federation"[9].

The annexation of Crimea also resulted in an international law case regarding a travelling exhibition that in 2014 was on display in a museum in Amsterdam, on the basis of loan contracts that

[8] See ICTY, Prosecutor v. Milorad Krnojelac (Foča), Case No. IT-97-25-T, testimony of Racine Manas, 18 January 2001, pp. 1854–1867.

[9] UNESCO Executive Board (2022). Follow-up of the situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Ukraine), 215 EX/5.I.E. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382685.

were originally negotiated with Ukrainian counterparts – that exhibition then became "orphaned, diasporic", "stateless" (van der Laarse 2016).

Massive artillery shelling in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the articulated constellation of military and paramilitary actors on the ground further damaged cultural sites. However, the international monitoring and documentation efforts in these cases have been more limited. The lethality and destructiveness of the conflict enormously amplified since February 2022.

The full-scale military offensive and occupation carried out by the Russian Federation on Ukrainian territory has resulted in human casualties and forced displacement. Thousands of civilians lost their lives or found refuge and shelter in cultural or religious buildings: the Russian airstrike on the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol (16 March 2022) has epitomised the extent to which the destruction of cultural sites and the deliberate targeting of civilians are intertwined. Along a similar vein, the damages caused by a missile attack to Odesa's Transfiguration Cathedral has marked a new phase of escalation of violence against cultural heritage of Ukraine. As a matter of fact, this happened after the Historic Centre of Odesa became a UNESCO World Heritage Site (with an application being made with the significant support of Italy and Greece), placing it under the protection of the international community (January 2023), as well as after the UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azoulay, carried out a mission to Ukraine, with visits to Kyiv, Chernihiv and Odesa (April 2023). In 2023, the Historic Centre of Odesa, together with the Historic Centre of L'viv and a religious architectural complex in Kyiv, have been inscribed on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger, while other cultural properties have also been inscribed on the International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection, under the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. In addition to signalling to its Members States their responsibility to monitor and contribute to the protection of these sites, including with financial and technical aid, UNESCO has committed to support initiatives to advise national authorities and heritage professionals, deliver protective equipment and materials, monitor the destruction and damage of cultural sites, among others.

Accordingly, since the start of the war in Ukraine, as of the end of November 2024, UNESCO has verified damage to 468 sites – 145 religious sites, 238 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 32 museums, 33 monuments, 17 libraries, 1 archive and 2 archaeological sites. The regions of Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odesa are the most affected by the destruction of cultural sites[10]; however, rehabilitation, restoration, repair and recovery endeavours, as well as consolidation/stabilisation works, have been carried out across the whole country. Not only UNESCO enhanced its presence on the ground (i.e. through the establishment, in September 2022, of a Liaison Office in Kyiv, led by Chiara Dezzi Bardeschi) but also liaised with other agencies and institutions pooling resources and expertise (i.e. UNITAR/UNOSAT) to base its damage assessment on reliable satellite imagery; Interpol and World Customs Organisation to train law enforcement professionals, police officers and judicial actors for preventing and combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property)[11]. Single Member States individually stood at the forefront of specific initiatives: for example, Italy pledged financial support to help repair the roof of the Transfiguration Cathedral, relying on synergies and collaboration between the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Italy's Special Envoy of the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Reconstruction of Ukraine (Davide La Cecilia), the Italian Embassy in Kyiv, UNESCO Liaison Office in Kyiv, and the regional office of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) in Kyiv. The Italian intervention in Odesa is designed in the framework of an

[10] UNESCO (2023), In the face of war, UNESCO's action in Ukraine, Document code CPE-2023/WS/6 Rev.6. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384454.locale=en.

[11] In January 2023 a training was organised in Warsaw with representatives from Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine.

initiative by two cultural institutions, respectively based in Rome and Milan (MAXXI and Triennale), supported by Italy's Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Ministry of Culture, to set up a Workshop on the Reconstruction of Ukraine, bringing together cultural institutions, architectural and engineering firms, as well as companies and economic actors to discuss the urban and architectural regeneration of Ukraine's cities and cultural heritage, creating a European hub for reconstruction. Apart from Italy's circumscribed engagement, if one widens the gaze would notice that the leading role for Ukraine's recovery is held by Japan, with nearly $26 million mobilized over the past 2 years. After all, Italy and Japan (together with other countries such as Canada) seem to share a "UNESCO-first approach", being hesitant vis-à-vis alternative actors that are recently gaining traction in the field of CHP.

On the other hand, it is important to recall that UNESCO has carried out a number of missions to Ukraine since February 2022 (also jointly with ICOMOS). During the official visit of the Director-General of UNESCO Audrey Azoulay to Ukraine (April 2023), President Volodymyr Zelensky called for an International Conference for the Recovery of the Cultural Sector of Ukraine; in June 2024, at the initiative of Lithuania, that conference took place and the representatives of 30 countries along with a few international partners (i.e. Cultural Emergency Response, World Monuments Fund…) committed to pledged to increase their support to the stabilisation, recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine's cultural sector, through the coordination of UNESCO. Moreover, since August 2023 an Action Plan for Culture in Ukraine has been developed by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine and UNESCO (it was then updated in May 2024). Among the priority lines that have been identified are monitoring, assessment, and documentation of damage to cultural heritage in Ukraine; as well as the delivery of preventive and urgent measures and repairs. The Action Plan also identifies a long list of partners and interlocutors, including UN agencies (UNESCO, UNDP, UN-Habitat, UNITAR/UNOSAT) the OSCE, ICOM and ICOMOS, and the European Commission, foundations (i.e. ALIPH, Global Heritage Fund, World Monuments Fund), Ukraine's Ministries (not only the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, but also the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development), museums (i.e. Maidan Museum) and NGOs (i.e., ICCROM, Blue Shield International, Cultural Emergency Response, Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab, Heritage Rescue Emergency Initiative, Museum for Change, UA Damage NGO, Ukraine Art Aid Center), universities - interestingly, Poland (via its National Institute of Cultural Heritage) is the only country represented individually and not in the framework of collective actors such as international organisations, institutions or networks.

UNESCO

Immediately after the start of the full-scale military offensive launched by the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian territory, UNESCO released a statement (March, 3rd 2022) of concern as well as commitment to assess damages, following the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Resolution on Aggression against Ukraine. In that context, explicit reference was made to the urgency of protecting the cultural heritage of Ukraine' seven World Heritage sites, notably located in Lviv and Kyiv; Odessa, Kharkiv, Chernihiv; the national archives situated in the country, some of which feature in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register; its sites commemorating the tragedy of the Holocaust, such as the Babyn Yar Holocaust memorial, but also the works of Maria Primachenko. In doing so, UNESCO has also underlined the obligations of international humanitarian law, notably the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two (1954 and 1999) Protocols, as well as the UN Security Council Resolution 2347.

UNESCO initiated a closed coordination process with the Ukrainian authorities, to support them in two directions: first, to mark as quickly as possible key historic monuments and sites across Ukraine with the distinctive emblem of the 1954 Hague Convention, an internationally recognised signal for the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict; second, to organise a meeting with museum directors to urgently design measures for safeguarding museum collections and cultural property. Furthermore, UNESCO immediately launched a cooperation with UNITAR/UNOSAT, to monitor the damages through satellite imagery analysis. A group of members of UNESCO Executive Board, including Italy, Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, called for the convocation of a Special Session, that then took place on the 15th of March.

In the following months, UNESCO undertook a range of activities within the boundaries of its mandate. In July 2022 it dispatched a "solo" mission to Ukraine to consolidate an initial assessment of the impact of the war on Ukraine's culture sector; subsequently, it organised other field visits in cooperation with ICCROM and ICOMOS: two missions to Odesa (July-August and August-September 2023) to conduct a comprehensive technical damage assessment of cultural and religious properties, as well as museums' collections; one damage assessment mission (October-November 2023) in Chernihiv; one mission for the documentation of the state of conservation and emergency preparedness planning in Kyiv (July- August 2024). Two of the abovementioned missions were supported by the UNESCO/Japanese Fund-in-Trust project "Support for Ukraine in culture and education through UNESCO; Emergency response for World Heritage and cultural property: damage assessment and protection". In the framework of the same project, UNESCO also organized trainings, jointly with ICCROM and in coordination with Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, on damage and risk assessment (October 2023). In addition to Japan, which is the second-largest bilateral donor after the United States for Ukraine's reconstruction (and also, UNDP Ukraine's largest governmental contributor, and the first non-NATO country to sign a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine), a number of countries have contributed to cultural heritage aid to Ukraine channelled via UNESCO: for example, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) has financed the project "Culture for Peace and Resilience: Creation of a Culture Hub in L'viv, Ukraine", developed under the UNESCO Programme "Heritage for Peace" and implemented by UNESCO itself in cooperation with Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, the National Commission of Ukraine for UNESCO, and in partnership with the City Council of L'viv. As already mentioned, Italy has adopted a particularly proactive stance: not only it has co-sponsored the Decisions adopted by UNESCO Executive Board at its 7th special session (Impact and consequences of the current situation in Ukraine in all aspects of UNESCO's mandate, 7 X/EX/DR.2.1 Corr.); and facilitated an agreement within the World Heritage Committee, whose chairmanship was attributed to Russia (the 45th session of the Committee, initially scheduled from 19 - 30 June 2022 in Kazan, was postponed for an identified period and without defined venue). Italy also provided the Ukrainian authorities with the technical expertise to prepare the candidature file of the Historic Centre of Odesa as a World Heritage Site; and continuously provides support to monitor the damage to the Ukrainian cultural heritage. Another interesting case is also offered by the donor (Qatar Fund for Development, Canada, Norway, France, Monaco, ANA Holdings INC, Estonia, The Netherlands, Slovakia, Luxembourg, Andorra, and Serbia) pooling resources via the Heritage Emergency Fund, established by UNESCO in 2015. This instrument has financially supported a pilot project launched in August 2022 and developed in partnership with the Museum for Change, a Ukrainian non-governmental organization (Aid for Heritage: Support to protect cultural heritage in Odesa).

All in all, UNESCO has sponsored several initiatives of capacity building, establishing frameworks for the provision of technical advice and expertise as well as equipment: the addresses

of such advisory assistance, mainly with the purpose of setting up a dedicated CHP taskforce and emergency teams, included not only the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy but also museum and heritage professionals, and occasionally the member of the armed forces. This endeavour resulted in the formation of the UNESCO Cultural Emergencies Expert Group, and the UNESCO Emergency Group for Museums in Ukraine. One of the most recent initiative has been the organisation, in August 2024, of a UNESCO-certified training, held in Kyiv, for specialized military and civilian personnel, as well as justice system workers, on the protection and monitoring of cultural property in Ukraine in wartime.

Finally, a distinct note is needed to mention the work of the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. In that framework, too, UNESCO undertook urgent measures, convening an extraordinary meeting of the Committee on March 18th 2022. On that occasion, it was reiterated the pressing imperative of marking key historic monuments and sites across Ukraine, as well as the transport of cultural property, with the distinctive emblem of the 1954 Hague Convention; and or removing movable cultural property from high-risk areas and their temporary storage in refuges. The Committee also granted enhanced protection to Ukraine's cultural heritage sites, while Ukraine submitted its application for international assistance, under the Fund for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, for emergency measures. Subsequently, at its 17th meeting (December 22), the Committee released a programme document (Protection of cultural property in Ukraine") mentioning, among other measures, the launch of a Cultural Heritage Monitoring Platform in partnership with UNITAR/UNOSAT, to georeference and visualize the results of the monitoring and assessment of damages to cultural sites in Ukraine through satellite imagery. That document also stated that such monitoring and assessment efforts are financed from the Post-Conflict and Post Disaster, a pooled funding to which Denmark, the Government of Flanders (Belgium), Ireland, Japan and Switzerland contributed.

European Union

The European Union is present on the ground, in Ukraine, since 2014 with a civilian non-executive CSDP mission with advisory tasks in relation to Security Sector Reform (European Union Advisory Mission Ukraine, EUAM), in the framework of its crisis response and conflict management role in the country after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the outbursts of military hostilities in the Donbas (Ivashchenko-Stadnik et al 2017). Moreover, since 2005 a EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) is operational and tasked with enhancing border security and tackling smuggling and trafficking. These two missions predate the establishment of the European Union Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine, in 2022. Whereas EUBAM has limited CH-related activities, EUAM has discretely and gradually integrated them in its mandate, also via its participation to the work of the Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group for Ukraine. Proceeding chronologically:

- in May 2023 EUAM co-organised an international high-profile conference titled "Cultural Heritage Crime: In Wartime and Beyond";
- EUAM commissioned Blue Shield International to prepare the Report "Assessment of Damage/Destruction of Cultural Heritage Sites in Ukraine, November 22 – August 23" as a background study to better understand the context and organise its response;
- in February and March 2024, respectively, EUAM supported the organisation of workshops on crimes against cultural heritage, in Kyiv and Poltava, joined by Ukrainian investigators and prosecutors from the National Police of Ukraine (NPU), the Security Services of Ukraine (SSU), the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI), the Office of the Prosecutor General (OPG)

and personnel from the regional prosecution offices (RPO) of Chernihiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Poltava, and Zaporizhzhia regions;

- in March 2024 EUAM supported the organisation (by the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine) the high-level conference "United for Justice. United for Heritage", convened in Kyiv and attended by representatives of Eurojust, European Commission/DG Justice, as well as the CoE and the ICC, and national judiciary authorities of Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia. On that occasion, the creation of a special state register was announced, to trace and inscrive all cultural heritage sites destroyed or damaged in the context of the war, and to then determine reparations/compensations/restitutions. Furthermore, a meeting of the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) for the investigation of international crimes committed in Ukraine took place;
- in June 2024, EUAM organised a series of practical workshops for law enforcers on counteracting crimes against cultural heritage.

In Brussels, too, the European institutions covered the issue of the destruction, protection and reconstruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine, especially promoting a number of capacity building actions, assisting Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, as well as partnering with ICCROM and financially supporting an initiative for training for the first national team of cultural first-aiders in Ukraine. The team is composed by heritage professionals who are actively working in the Territorial Defence Forces and the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Cultural Property Protection Units).

The first institution publicly and officially reacting on that topic has been the European Parliament, through a Resolution released on the 20th of October 2022 on cultural solidarity with Ukraine and a joint emergency response mechanism for cultural recovery in Europe (2022/2759(RSP)). A few months later, in April 2023, the European Commission set up a dedicated sub-group to the Commission expert group on cultural heritage in Ukraine, featuring a number of experts (from Ukraine, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Czech Republic, Romania, Poland, Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina), representatives of different organisations (such as UNESCO, CoE, ICCROM, ICOMOS, ICOM, ALIPH), as well as of NGOs (such as Cultural Emergency Response). Notably, only Italy is included also with a representative of national authorities. It is also noteworthy that, according to the available information, the subgroup only held one meeting in June 2023.

On a more practical level, emergency equipment for the protection of Ukrainian cultural heritage has been delivered under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

Lastly, some EU member states individually get to the forefront to defend cultural heritage at war in Ukraine: Italy, Germany, Austria, Poland (via the Support Center for Culture in Ukraine, operating within the National Institute of Cultural Heritage), Bulgaria, and Croatia, in particular, engaged with a variety of activities.

Ukraine's national authorities

In February 2023, the first International Forum on Safety of Cultural Heritage "War in Ukraine. The Battle for Culture" was hosted in Kyiv - organized by the Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI) in cooperation with the National Museum of the Revolution of Dignity (Maidan Museum) and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine. Among the participants, it is interesting to mention the Armed Forces of Ukraine to restate the increasing processes of securitisation and militarisation of cultural heritage protection (Russo and Giusti 2019; Foradori 2017). On that occasion, Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy eloquently stated that

"There are many signs of cultural genocide, among which are targeted attacks, banning, confiscation, and burning of Ukrainian books, illegal transportation of objects of cultural value, archive documents, prohibiting Ukrainians from accessing their cultural heritage, and the russification of occupied territories. The war made it clear that cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is one of the key elements of national security"[12].

The amendments to the Law on National Security, to the Law "On the Protection of Cultural Heritage", as well as the adoption of two framework Laws "On the principles of state policy in the field of cultural heritage" and "On the preservation and restoration of national memory" exactly underline how cultural heritage, memories, identities, and security are intertwined, especially in the context of what several Ukrainian scholars interpret as a postcolonial war. These legislative initiatives establish, for example, the non-entry or the withdrawal of certain monuments and objects from the State Register listing national cultural heritage, and specifically those deemed bearing the signs of Russian or Soviet past domination.

In conflict (and post-conflict) contexts, dissonant cultural heritage appears to be a recurrent feature: the selection of cultural objects and sites that are deemed "at risk", "under attack", to be protected, and how actions of preservation and restoration should be designed and implemented inherently become issues of contention and contestation. International donors and partners should be aware of these dynamics. For example, Odesa represents a case in point. In January 2023, at the 18th Extraordinary session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Ukraine's nomination for the inscription of the "Historic Center of the Port City of Odesa" on the List of World Heritage in Danger has been assessed. The application was prepared by the Odesa City Council, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine in partnership with international experts, as well as Ukraine's National Committee of ICOMOS and the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory. The discussion within the World Heritage Committee has been based also on a report delivered by ICOMOS, a report that mentioned the foundation of Odesa in the 18th century, during the Russian imperial period. That note was disputed in an open letter signed by Ukraine's Minister of Culture and Information Policy, the Mayor of Odesa and Ukraine's Permanent Representative to UNESCO, on the grounds that it conveyed a pro-russian narrative, not only erasing Ukraine's past but also legitimising Russia's claims justifying its military offensive and the occupation of Ukrainian territories. Mirror-like, in October 2024, more than 150 intellectuals, artists and cultural professionals signed a letter[13] directly addressing the Director-General of UNESCO (but also the Head of UNESCO Desk in Ukraine and the Mayor of Odesa , among others), but actually appealing to President Zelensky, expressing concerns about the socalled "decolonisation" law ("On the condemnation and prohibition of propaganda of Russian imperial policy in Ukraine and decolonization of toponymy")[14]. According to the signatories, this law was allegedly passed with limited democratic accountability and no public consultations of Odesans; on the other hand, it has paved the way to earmarking for removal a number of monuments and reportedly undermined Odesa's cultural identity, defined by the World Heritage Committe as "multi-cultural" and "cosmopolitan" - precisely in the nomination text[15].

Other relevant actors

[12] https://www.maidanmuseum.org/en/node/2379.

[13] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1el6lTKRqUPdFCFSdx4J3K2oOvVUwEJQ6vwZtmVD6gzo/edit?usp=sharing

[14] https://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/42281; https://www.kyivpost.com/post/42752

[15] https://whc.unesco.org/document/196047

Attacks to Ukrainian cultural heritage have triggerend increased activism and mobilisation among cultural heritage practitioners, curators, museum directors, architects, archeologists operating in the country. Several of them coalesced around non-governmental organizations, civil society organisations and transnational networks that either already existed, as in the case of Museum for Change, or have been established in 2022-2023, as in the case of the Heritage Rescue Emergency Initiative.

A constellation of organisations (i.e. Europa Nostra, European Heritage Hub, Cultural Emergency Response, Heritage for Peace, Blue Shield International, World Monument Fund/World Monument Watch, to name a few) as well as specialised international institutions (such ICOMOS and ICCROM) have played a key role in channelling international heritage aid, supporting local beneficiaries and recipients in project implementation and contributing to raising awareness and making the topic visible in conferences, summits, reports and publications. Among these actors, the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage (in Conflict Areas) - ALIPH is worth mentioning. Since 2022, ALIPH has sponsored projects in Ukraine worthy a total budget of almost 7.5 million Euros, supporting nearly 400 Ukrainian organizations in over 140 locations spanning all regions of Ukraine. In particular, ALIPH has focused on financing and coordinating the transportation of special equipment, the evacuation of collections and the creation of "refuges" for cultural objects (i.e. storage areas) and of "heritage ambulances" for conservation professionals to travel to endangered cultural sites.

Nagorno-Karabakh

The case of Nagorno-Karabakh shows the intersection of cultural heritage protection with ongoing geopolitical tensions, raising questions about identity, memory, and juxtaposed historical narratives in frozen conflict settings.

Since 1994, the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in South Caucasus (Artsakh for Armenians, Karabakh for Azerbaijani) has been the object of a territorial armed dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, that had its origins in ethnic tensions dating back at least a century, as evidenced by the clashes in 1918-1920 culminated in violent episodes such as the Shusha massacre, and escalated after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since 1991 and until recently, this area of approximately 4,400 km^2 corresponding to a part of the Soviet Autonomous Oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh and to the Shahumyan Province, predominantly populated by Armenians, has been controlled by the de facto authorities of the Republic of Artsakh, a self-proclaimed independent government based in Stepanakert still heavily reliant on and closely integrated with Armenia. The provisional ceasefire agreement signed in Bishkek on 5 May 1994 has been breached several times and the international efforts – lead by the OSCE Minsk Group – to promote an effective settlement of the dispute have not been successful (Broers 2019). In 2020 Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, attacked Karabakh and in 44 days conquered the territories lost in 1988-1994 war. Russia's mediation led to a ceasefire, the occupied territories and some neighbouring areas went back under Azerbaijan's control and Russian military troops were sent in the area to ensure the safety of Armenian citizens. The situation became very tense in December 2022, when Azerbaijan occupied the Lachin Corridor, the only road that linked Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, causing a humanitarian crisis. After a period of heightened tensions, on 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan initiated a large-scale military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, which it labelled as an "anti-terrorist" campaign aimed at neutralizing Armenian military positions. The offensive and its aftermath led to the massive flight of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians; moreover, it sparked protests in Armenia against Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government, accused of failing to protect ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

During the 2020 military operations, the cultural heritage within the area of Nagorno-Karabakh was put constantly at risk and a number of monuments were damaged (Sargsyan and Shirinian 2024). On 7 December 2021 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) indicated in its order concerning Armenian claims of Azerbaijani violations of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) that Azerbaijan "shall take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artefacts"[16].

It is important to notice that accusations of deliberate destruction, falsification and appropriation (often conducive to ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide (Novic 2016) have been mutually launched by Artsakh/Armenian and by Azerbaijani people and governments over the last decades, contributing to the conflict's exacerbation. Recently, the lack of official and open communication between the parties involved and the denied access to the area have facilitated the spreading of disinformation and have further undermined trust about the chances of reaching an agreement for a stable and sustainable peace for all the peoples involved (Armoudian and Guyodo 2025). The absence of international institutions and neutral actors as well as of the international press makes it harder to establish a common ground regarding the relevant facts connected to the conflict on which it would be possible to start a dialogue.

Since the exodus of the Armenian population in Autumn 2023, the dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh (on 28 September 2023 the last President Samvel Shahramanyan signed a decree dissolving state institutions from 1 January 2024 in order to obtain a ceasefire[17]) and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Nagorno-Karabakh completed in June 2024, access to the area has been denied to third parties by the Azerbaijani military authorities. So, the monitoring, maintenance and restoration of the damaged and endangered heritage has been impossible for international organisation and very difficult for academics and cultural heritage professionals. Moreover, because of the development of conflict, the cultural heritage in the Eastern part of Armenia close to the border with Azerbaijan is now endangered.

UNESCO

On 20 November 2020 after meetings with the representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Director-General of UNESCO Audrey Azoulay – recalling the provisions of the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols and the UN Security Council resolution 2347 of 2017 – formally proposed that UNESCO carried out "a preliminary field mission, in order to draw up an inventory of the most significant cultural assets, as a prerequisite for effective protection of the region's heritage"[18]. The proposal received the full support of the Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group and the agreement in principle of the representatives of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, up to now this technical assessment mission has never been deployed and no official UNESCO statement concerning cultural heritage protection in Nagorno Karabakh has been issued since December 2020[19]. Throughout the conflict, UNESCO strived to

[16] Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan), Provisional Measures, Order of 7 December 2021, I.C.J. Reports 2021, p. 361 https://www.icj-cij.org/node/106095

[17] https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/28/europe/nagorno-karabakh-officially-dissolve-intl/index.html

[18] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/nagorno-karabakh-reaffirming-obligation-protect-cultural-goods-unesco-proposes-sending-mission-field

[19] In the last reaction from the Press Service Department of the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the proposed

maintain a neutral stance, urging both parties to safeguard cultural heritage and comply with international law. This has provoked criticism from part of Armenian and international civil society. For instance, Monument Watch, an academic platform engaging with the monitoring of monuments and cultural heritage in Nagorno Karabakh, blamed the inertia and ineffectiveness of UNESCO and of the OSCE Minsk Group[20]. During its 18th meeting held in Paris on 14-15 December 2023, the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the UNESCO body responsible for the application of the 1954 Convention and of its two Protocols, approved Armenia's request to grant international assistance, contributing with limited funding (30.000 US dollar) to the preparatory measures undertaken to grant the protection from conflict-related effects for two Armenian heritage sites included in the tentative lists of UNESCO's World Heritage List, the monasteries of Tatev and Tatevi Anapat and the nearby areas of the Vorotan Valley. Like other heritage sites in the Syunik province, the proximity of the border and Azerbaijani interest to control a strategic area might endanger the integrity of the monuments[21]. In 2018, the Committee had granted international assistance for two other Armenian heritage sites threatened by the conflict dynamics, the Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley. So far, no Armenian monuments have been inscribed in the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger, which would allow for a stronger and long-term assistance for the protection of heritage.

Harsh reactions to the destruction of cultural heritage in the recent Azerbaijani military offensives in Nagorno Karabakh have been expressed also in other international organizations. In his speech delivered at the 1416th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council on 23 March 2023, Armenian Ambassador Armen Papikyan explicitly linked the destruction of cultural heritage during the conflict to a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing: "... cultural and religious heritage has been erased to ground in the territories that came under the control of Azerbaijan following the war of aggression. Azerbaijan has virtually annihilated every trace of the civilizational presence of Armenians in all the territories currently under its control, in particular in Nakhichevan, as well as in the occupied parts of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and other areas"[22]. The words used seem to echo previous statements delivered in international fora by Azerbaijani's officials during the 1990s and 2000s, when Armenia was in control of the disputed territory, denouncing the attacks to the Azerbaijani's cultural heritage[23].

European Union

Through its support of the programme entitled «The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh», the EU has been the largest donor to civil society programmes and to non-governmental organisations involved in the conflict, with a dedicated budget

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UNESCO mission to assess the state of cultural heritage in the conflict area is under consideration for the Azerbaijani government, although security reasons and the biased nature of the international organisation are pointed out: https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no47920-commentary-of-the-press-service-department-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-to-the-unesco-press-release-on-sending-of-a-mission-to-azerbaijan

[20] https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/unescos-concerns-amid-ongoing-destruction-of-artsakhs-heritage-and-issues-of-azerbaijani-accountability/

[21] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391744. During the Committee's 19th meeting held in Paris on 11-12 December 2024, it has been decided on the basis of the submitted intermediary progress report, that the Armenian government will complete the preparatory study and present a final report in view of the Committee 20th meeting that will take place in December 2025. See https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391744

[22] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/0/542022.pdf

[23] See for instance the report published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan in collaboration with the Heidar Aliyev Foundation in 2007, *War against Azerbaijan: Targeting Cultural Heritage*: https://www.mfa.gov.az/files/War-against-Azerbaijan-Targeting-Cultural-Heritage.pdf

of approximately 18 million euros between 2010 and 2019.

With the resumption of the hostilities in 2020, the UE committed to further humanitarian aid (approximately 17 million euros in 2020-2021), paying special attention to guaranteeing humanitarian access and return of the displaced populations in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, preserving and restoring the cultural and religious heritage and investigating possible war crimes. Since then, the EU (also through the format of the European Political Format and via the direct involvement of the then-President of the European Council Charles Michel in mediation talks) engaged with some forms of conflict resolution in relation to Nagorno Karabakh, although such engagement remained circumscribed and not devoid of ambivalences (Russo 2024).

The European Parliament has been particularly vocal, denounced "Azerbaijan's continued policy of erasing and denying the Armenian cultural heritage in and around Nagorno-Karabakh", pursued not only with the deliberate destruction of artefacts, but also with "the falsification of history" (Resolution 2022/2582(RSP) of 10 March 2022 on the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh). According to the European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2022 on the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh, "considerable deliberate damage was caused by Azerbaijan to Armenian cultural heritage during the 2020 war, particularly during the shelling of the Gazanchi Church, the Holy Saviour/Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shusha/Shushi, as well as the destruction, changing of the function of, or damage to other churches and cemeteries during and after the conflict, such as Zoravor Surb Astvatsatsin Church near the town of Mekhakavan and St Yeghishe in Mataghis village in Nagorno-Karabakh". While "1.456 monuments, mainly Armenian, came under Azerbaijan's control after the ceasefire of 9 November 2020", the European Parliament noticed the serious allegations concerning the involvement of the authorities of Azerbaijan in the destruction of cemeteries, churches and historical monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh and requested Azerbaijan to "enable UNESCO to have access to the heritage sites in the territories under its control, in order to be able to proceed with their inventory and for Azerbaijan to ensure their protection"[24]. The European Parliament returned to the issue of cultural heritage protection in the area in several subsequent resolutions - namely, Resolution 2023/2504(RSP) of 19 January 2023 on the humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh, Resolution 2023/2879(RSP) of 5 October 2023 on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan's attack and the continuing threats against Armenia (especially at art. 8), Resolution 2024/2580(RSP) of 13 March 2024 on closer ties between the EU and Armenia and the need for a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Notwithstanding the impossibility of accessing the conflict area, EU civilian missions have been deployed in Armenia throughout the recent developments of the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh. The short-term mission European Union Monitoring Capacity to Armenia (EUMCAP) operated from 20 October 2022 to 19 December 2022. On 20 February 2023 the civilian EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), under the common security and defence policy, was established following the request of the Armenian government, after the preparatory work carried out from 20 December 2022 to 23 January 2023 by the European Union Planning Assistance Team in Armenia (EUPAT). It has a mandate to monitor and report on the developments on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, though it is allowed to operate only on the Armenian side of the border as Azerbaijan refuses to have the mission on its side of the border. Furthermore, EUMA aims to facilitate the collaboration between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Quite surprisingly, the mandate of EU civilian missions to Armenia has never included any cultural heritage monitoring activity, nor any cultural heritage diplomacy task. In December 2023, the EU Foreign Affairs Council agreed to increase the presence on the ground from 138 staff to 209. On 30 January 2025 EUMA – staffed with 200 people – was confirmed for two

[24] European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2022 on the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh (2022/2582(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0080_EN.html

further years until 19 February 2027, with a budget allocation of over 44 million euro. Although the issue of CHP has not been included in the mandate of EU missions in the Caucasus so far, something might change in the future. On 25 April 2024, the EUMA personnel together with EUMM Georgia took part in an online workshop on Cultural Heritage Protection organised by the Slovenian training centre CEP and the European Union Civilian Training initiative (EUCTI).

Other relevant actors

During our research stay in Yerevan carried out in June 2024, the position of activists was evident and converged in considering Azerbaijani acts towards Armenian monuments as "an occupation of heritage", a deliberate strategy combining actions of destruction, erasure and revisionism and obstructing access[25]. While in general international organisations and third states (Russia, Turkey, Iran, France, the Vatican) have been silent or have shown intermittent attention to the issue of cultural heritage protection within the framework of this conflict, transnational civil society networks including scholars, human rights activists and professionals have been working to keep the topic in the public debate and to extract data and information about the current state of Armenian cultural heritage[26].

Monument Watch and Europa Nostra are certainly worth mentioning, along with cultural foundations and networks connected to the Armenian diaspora, such as for instance ASOF (American Society of Fellows), the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Tufenkian Foundation, the Aragats Foundation, all involved in several projects concerning awareness-raising, research and monitoring of endangered heritage sites (Féron and Baser 2024). In particular, Europa Nostra is at the forefront of efforts, by civil society actors and heritage professionals, to make this topic and this area of the world visible, with open calls and public appeals such as the Tsaghkunk Declaration on Armenian Cultural Heritage[27].

From the collaboration of local and transnational partners and donors have been developed initiatives such as "We are our mountains", a development agency funded in 2022 by former Artsakh minister and Armenian-Russian entrepreneur and philanthropist Ruben Vardanyan, since 27 September 2023 political prisoner of Azerbaijan. The development agency has the protection of cultural heritage in the conflict zone as one of its core goals, together with the humanitarian assistance to Artsakh refugees[28]. Another initiative worth mentioning is the digital preservation project sponsored by the European Heritage Hub carried out by TUMO Center since 2018 in Nagorno Karabakh and recently expanded to include cultural heritage in Armenia. This project bridges informal education and citizen science, using advanced technological tools such as 3D scanning and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping to realise an inventory of cultural heritage that facilitates the tasks of monitoring, maintenance/restoration and reconstruction[29]. Armenian and international research institutions have been collaborating throughout the conflict in order to monitor

[25] See the report published by the University Network for Human Rights, *We are No One: How Impunity for Three Years of Atrocities is Erasing Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenians*, 2024, especially Chapter 6. https://www.humanrightsnetwork.org/publications/we-are-no-one

[26] See the recent reportage published by the US-based NGO Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED): https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Destruction-of-Armenian-heritage-20-Sept.pdf

[27] https://www.europanostra.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/202310-Tsaghkunk-Declaration-on-Armenian-Cultural-Heritage.pdf

[28] Details and news on the ongoing projects can be found on the agency's website: https://ourmountains.am/

[29] https://tumo.org/armenian-cultural-heritage/

the conditions of Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno Karabakh - e.g., the multidisciplinary research centre ZECO - Zentrum zur Erforschung des Christlichen Ostens at the Paris Lodron University of Salzburg[30] and the research programme in heritage forensics based at Cornell and Purdue Universities Caucasus Heritage Watch[31].

Conclusions

The body of literature analysing the interconnection between security and cultural heritage protection offers much evidence to support the thesis that cultural heritage in conflict and post-conflict settings is of paramount importance for several interconnected reasons. Cultural heritage is deeply intertwined with the identity and history of communities, serving as a tangible link to their past and a source of shared values. Its preservation helps maintain a sense of continuity and belonging within the conflict-affected communities, which is essential for rebuilding societal institutions and to strengthen societal cohesion. Moreover, cultural heritage can serve as a significant economic asset, a crucial pillar of planning and implementing reconstruction strategies based on the normative ideas of sustainable development and inclusive resources management. This is particularly important in post-conflict settings, where economic recovery is a pressing priority. By preserving and valorising cultural sites and artifacts – including the examples of conflict-related "dissonant" cultural heritage, communities can develop tourism and cultural industries that not only generate income but also promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Protecting and restoring cultural heritage after conflict can also act as a catalyst for peace and reconciliation, if participative and peace-oriented cooperation schemes among former enemies are promoted and put in place. Since very often – as the three cases presented in this working paper dramatically show – during and after conflict cultural heritage can be heavily securitised and weaponised and can foster dehumanising and ethnic-hatred generating narratives, thus risking to further complicate the conflictual dynamics, the role of third actors in facilitating the pursuing of such schemes is fundamental.

The cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine and Nagorno Karabakh show the complexity of realising CHP in and after conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement areas and hint at the importance of setting up timely and proactive international cooperation networks and operational schemes involving various stakeholders, including local governments, international organizations, and local as well as transnational civil society actors. They also reveal – especially if one compares the two conflicts ongoing in Ukraine and Nagorno Karabakh – the importance of the attention of the international community and the media coverage of international broadcasts to increase the prospects of carrying out effective initiatives of monuments' mapping, monitoring, protection and reconstruction. While in Ukraine the issue of CHP has received remarkable and continuous attention, in Nagorno Karabakh the attention of the international community has been intermittent. While in the former case an international mobilisation to save Ukrainian monuments, museums and collections has been put in place, in the latter case the absence from the public debate has created fertile ground for the spreading of biased and hatred-generating narratives and the deliberate destruction, erasure and misappropriation of cultural artifacts. Moreover, the attitude and policies of UNESCO appear dissimilar, if one considers the decisions adopted, the reports published and the presence in the field. As the Bosnian case shows, concerning the post-conflict situation the reach of an agreement regarding CHP is not a guarantee of its steady and harmonic implementation. As a matter of fact, though the Dayton Peace Agreement included a commitment to protect cultural heritage, the restoration and rebuilding of cultural and religious property has been a difficult and often contested process, which

[30] https://www.plus.ac.at/zeco-zentrum-zur-erforschung-des-christlichen-ostens/?lang=en

[31] https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/

has sometimes contributed to the rekindling of tensions, making the peace process more difficult to achieve. In all three cases considered, the partnership between international organizations, local governments and local and transnational civil society actors appears to be the most promising solution to transcend the conflict dynamics and to produce experiments of collaboration between the conflict-affected communities. However, some challenges need to be taken into account and openly addressed, in order to increase the chances of success of such experiments. We will highlight five: the political sensitivity of previously securitised and weaponised cultural heritage; the hostility and resistance that joint restoration/management projects might face from local communities; the fragmented character of cultural heritage management which can complicate efforts aimed at effective safeguarding of monument sites; the lack of funding and resources for cultural heritage protection and management for conflict-affected local communities and the risks connected to economic exploitation by corrupted public actors and/or by criminal networks; the difficult coordination of international cooperation initiatives in order to maintaining a neutral attitude and resisting interference in highly polarised contexts, defining the priorities of CHP, finding and allocating appropriate funds and resources to the local actors engaging in peace-oriented experiments of collaboration.

For decades, Italy has shown remarkable potential for leadership and commitment to safeguarding cultural heritage within the international community. Through initiatives like the "Blue Helmets for Culture" Task Force and the Unite4Heritage Task Force and through cooperation with Italian and local academic actors, the Italian foreign policy initiatives as well as the Italian contributions to the international missions of peacekeeping and peacebuilding have made an active contribution to the efforts aimed at cultural heritage protection in conflict and post-conflict settings. Highlighting the value of cultural heritage as well as facilitating the connections between local governments and cultural heritage conservation experts based at Italian academic and governmental institutions, the Italian public actors have engaged in cultural heritage diplomacy, focusing on sharing experience and technical know-how for the short- and medium-term protection of artistic heritage vis-à-vis conflict dynamics. Because of its recognised leadership in this field, Italy could further enhance its role as a key interlocutor in post-conflict settings, operating as a facilitator for innovative reconciliation strategies. This requires a more proactive stance from the part of the Italian governmental actors and the continuous commitment to include CHP in the mandate of international peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, offering a significant contribution to the planning and implementation of CHP training programmes for military as well as for civilian personnel and promoting awareness-raising and training initiatives for local stakeholders.

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Cultural Heritage and Security across the Middle East: Insights from Syria and Palestine

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Introduction

Destruction and deliberate targeting of cultural heritage has been a recurrent issue in the history of armed conflicts. However, the role of monuments, antiquities, and fine art has not remained unaltered. Contrary, it has constantly evolved. While, in the first phase, they accounted for the victims of destruction and conquest, they have gradually been instrumentalized as tools of cultural oppression. Such historical progression has been central to Nemeth's studies on cultural security, which focus on how cultural heritage has gradually countered new threats beyond those traditionally posed by armed conflicts. These include the risks for cultural property while facing terrorism and international security issues, but also novel threats in peacetime (Nemeth 2007). Gaining a deeper understanding of these evolutions and transformations requires an increasingly interdisciplinary approach, in which cultural studies, history, archaeology, international relations, and security studies interact (Ibid.). This interaction is at the base of what Rosén calls the heritage-security nexus (Rosén 2022). This nexus calls for a cross-sectoral approach to study how security and cultural issues intertwine. This implies a synergetic use of policy areas that have rarely been mixed – or at least till recent evolutions. Not only did recent evolutions of the heritage-security nexus call for new methodological approaches, but they are also responsible for new challenges and ethical considerations. This is evident when looking at the massive heritage destruction and systematic lootings that the Middle East has faced since the early 2000s (Christensen 2022). Indeed, in the Middle East, unprecedented and systematic cultural destructions have highlighted how protecting cultural heritage remains anchored to issues on "peacebuilding, conflict resolution, tolerance, societal resilience, and reconciliation" (Ibid.) These interrelations ultimately outline a broader security agenda, in which cultural heritage protection can embody human security (Rosén 2017; 2022). Because of the relevance that the heritage-security nexus has acquired in the Middle East, this paper investigates the experiences of two countries in the area: Syria and Palestine.

Syria

In Syria, the heritage-security nexus has evolved at an incredible pace. The civil war that still rages in Syria today originated in 2011 due to discontent with the actions of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, generating large-scale protests (Seif 2015). Armed conflicts in Syria have encouraged clandestine excavations and illicit trafficking of artifacts (Ibid.). However, the Syrian case shows even more clearly how artistic heritage does not merely own a passive nature.

First, the involvement of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has added a new level of complexity to the activities of clandestine excavations and illicit trafficking (Christensen 2022). The extraction of artifacts from archaeological sites has become among these groups' main sources for self-financing (Chechi, 2015). Therefore, not only have these activities grown beyond measure during the Syrian Civil War (Seif, 2015), but antiquities trafficking from Syria and Iraq to the West contributed to prolonging the war through funding, thus fuelling a humanitarian crisis (Legnér 2017).

Second, the Syrian Civil War has been marked by the deliberate destruction of monuments and artistic works. While the monuments usually targeted by Jihadist groups are those that incorporate Western principles (Ibid.), in Syria, the ideology has not spared non-Sunni cultural heritage (Russo & Giusti 2019). As in the case of Beirut, attacks on cultural heritage have aimed to erase the memory of the communities connected to them, diminishing their history and identity (Seif 2015).

The evolution of the securitization process following the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage has acquired a whole new dimension. This evolution has reached its peak with the case of Palmyra, a Greco-Roman site and World Heritage since 1980, which was destroyed in May 2015 at the hands of ISIS (Gerstenblith 2022). Only a few months earlier, in February 2015, Resolution 2199 of the UN Security Council had been conceived as a response to the destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq (Russo & Giusti, 2019). The destruction of Palmyra was rooted in ideology as it aimed to eliminate traces of a "cosmopolitan", "pagan", and "idolatrous" past that did not correspond to the vision of ISIS (Chechi 2015). Furthermore, this destruction responded to the Islamic State's twofold aspiration to exercise internal power over its territories and, at the same time, establish a global caliphate. By destroying Palmyra, ISIS reclaimed its control over a territory, while replacing UNESCO authority and its values of universal cultural heritage (Russo & Giusti 2019).

Palmyra's seizure immediately raised the international community's media attention, creating a narrative in which its destruction accounted for a global loss (□hristensen, 2022; Winter, 2016). This narrative was supported by UNESCO, and especially by former Director-General Irina Bokova, who systematically pushed for the international community's involvement in the fight against terrorism by interweaving the protection of global cultural heritage with security strategies (Chechi, 2015). As a result, attacks against culture were equated to attacks against minorities, their identity, and their existen□e (□hristensen 2022; Puskás 2019). The brutal killing by ISIS of Khaled al-Asaad, archaeologist and head of the antiquities of Palmyra, ultimately sealed the overlap between the cultural and human heritage destruction. Furthermore, by carrying out his execution in front of the local museum of Palmyra, ISIS exploited the mediated attention of UNESCO sites to spread its ideology (Christensen 2022).

This discursive framing developed by Bokova soon became a prerogative in the international security agenda (Foradori 2017). Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon reiterated the connection between ISIS's destruction and looting of cultural heritage and humanitarian security (UN Secretary-General 2016, 4; □hristensen 2022). □ultural heritage prote□tion was depi□ted as a "political and security imperative" that is a "central component of peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts and humanitarian and development policies" (Foradori, 2017).

In March 2016, troops loyal to Bashar al-Assad, allies from Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and Russia carried out a coordinated operation and regained control of Palmyra (Russo & Giusti 2019). The operation was portrayed as a success and enhanced military campaigns to limit ISIS's geographical control (Ibid.). However, it also raised concerns about foreign intervention officially undertaking heritage protection.

Palestine

Palestine has been blessed with many cultural beauties (Bshara 2013). Only in Gaza, recent surveys have confirmed the existence of 130 archeological and historical sites, that collect Palestinian cultural heritage together with cities like Gaza, Khan Yunis, Dayr al-Balah, and Rafah (Taha 2024). However,

the abundance of natural and cultural resources has also represented a threat to the well-being of these territories. Especially following the colonial waves, British first and Israeli later, the vast Palestinian cultural heritage has been subjected to illicit trafficking, expropriation, and destruction (Ibid.). With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Israeli claims to appropriate Palestinian territories grew and resulted in increasing violence. Towns and villages became theaters of violence and occupation while their cultural heritage fell victim to destruction. Between 1948 and 1952, land claims by Israel became one of the main tools for reorganizing entire towns and spreading a new identity (Amiry and Bshara 2005; Nora1996).

With the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, the mechanisms of (de) territorialization were exacerbated, as was the process of cultural homogenization against the Palestinians (Bshara 2013). Forced homogenization was carried out both through subtraction and creational mechanisms. The first aimed to deprive Palestinians of their cultural heritage (Bourdieu 1979; Bshara 2013; Hodder & □essford 2004), while the se□ond imposed a □ulture by establishing Jewish settlements and national parks in previously Palestinian territories. Examples of this are the nature reserves created in the West Bank[32] by Israel, which legitimized its control over the area (Aljazeera 2020).

In 1993, with the Oslo Agreement, the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were divided into three areas subject to different Palestinian and Israeli controls (Area A, B, C).[33] In addition to upending the lives of thousands of Palestinians, this division had important repercussions on their artistic heritage. Indeed, countless Palestinian archaeological sites fell under the complete Israeli occupation of Area C (Bshara 2013). Israeli indifference towards these sites soon led to a phenomenon already analyzed in the Syrian cases: the growth of illicit excavation and trafficking activities. However, the geographical tripartition had two other consequences more closely related to the Palestinian case. First, the division resulted in an urban increase in Area A under the Palestinian National Authority. Because of the growing population, historical/cultural monuments were converted and subjected to real-estate investment plans. Second, no legal framework followed the Oslo Agreement to deal with the destruction of cultural heritage (Ibid.).

In the aftermath of the Oslo Agreement, the common narrative of Palestinian identity was consolidated around the idea of "memory fever" (Doumani 2009). All cultural activities aimed to fill the void left by Israeli colonialism, trying to reconcile the broken memory of Palestine with alternative future imaginaries (Bshara 2013). Beginning in the 1970s, some NGOs led a national movement to protect cultural heritage, focusing on symbols of Palestinian traditions. In the 1990s, this movement was joined by activities of organizations and institutions interested in the preservation of architectural heritage (e.g. Riwaq Center for Architectural Conservation in Ramallah) (Bleibleh & Awad 2020). In the same years, the possibility of inscribing Palestinian heritage sites within the World Heritage List became more concrete. Until that time, the status of "occupied territories" had prevented Palestine from proposing that some of its historical/archaeological sites join the list.

[32] It is worth noticing that the West Bank includes heritage (e.g. in Bethlehem, Hebron, Jerusalem, etc.) valuable for Christian communities (Orthodox, Copt, Armenian, Catholic, etc.), meaning that not only Palestinians as an ethnic group are suffering from reckless management of heritage, but also ancient religious groups.

[33] For reference regarding the partitioning: “Area A, which includes the populated towns and villages, fell under the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) civil and security control; Area B, which includes a buffer zone around Area A, fell under PNA civil administration and under Israeli security control; and Area C, which includes the vast majority of the Occupied Territories (OT), fell under the Israeli civil and security control.” (Bshara, 2013: 298).

However, the new "proto-state" status brought about by the Oslo Agreement changed this situation and facilitated the establishment of a UNESCO office in Ramallah in 1997 (De Cesari 2014).

Encompassing how Palestinian cultural heritage has been targeted over the past 75 years helps us understand how the devastating destruction of the recent attacks on Gaza is part of a larger process. Cultural heritage is conceived not only as physical remains of Palestinian history but also of its resistance (Bshara 2013). As described by Said, the Palestinian resistance accounts for "a struggle for visibility" (Said in Dabashi 2006: 3). By pushing for visibility and international recognition, the inscription of Palestinian sites in the World Heritage List (e.g. the Nativity of Bethlehem) represents a threat to Israeli hegemony (Bshara 2013). For this reason, in addition to the 600 towns razed to the ground, the forced expulsion of thousands of people from their homes, and military genocidal/cleansing activities, historical and archaeological sites have also become targets of systematic destruction (Taha 2024). This process aims to eliminate traces of collective identity while targeting those who find refuge in these structures. The targeting and systematic destruction of artistic heritage was cited in South Africa's case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as evidence of genocide in Gaza, urging immediate intervention (Adams 2024). Equally, human rights groups, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor have accused UNESCO, pointing out its failure to protect Palestinian artistic heritage and hold Israel accountable for its actions (Ibid.).

Challenges and ethical considerations

The two cases exemplify the evolution of the heritage-security nexus, focusing on the transformations of the Middle East in recent decades. The speed and repercussions of these developments raise new challenges and ethical questions. In particular, three main issues will be encompassed in this section: the friction between local and universal, the growth of unwanted attention, and the connection between human and cultural survival.

Regarding the friction between local and universal, Bokova's narrative is a relevant element (Christensen 2022). Indeed, Bokova’s description of cultural heritage as a common good has perpetrated a process in which heritage is emptied of its most local dimension. An artifact, born in a specific context and owning a function for the community members, risks being relegated to a merely aesthetic function and pigeonholed into a typically Western type of protection. Together with these discourses, some activities are already contributing to this evolution, such as the creation of safe zones for artifacts, their relocation, and partitioning in Western museums (Russo & Giusti 2019). Specifically, at the 70th General Conference of UNESCO, President Hollande proposed the "right to asylum" for artistic works in distressed scenarios, breaking the usual state-centric approach (Ibid.). Following this conference, Italy proposed a UN-led peacekeeping mission to protect world heritage sites (Ibid.). Last, the emergence of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) connected to cultural heritage demonstrates how its protection has acquired universalizing and institutional characteristics.

The consolidation of this approach risks limiting the spaces in which communities, especially non-Western ones, can express themselves directly in the protection of their heritage. An example is the Palestinian historical/archaeological sites inscription in the World Heritage List. If on the one hand, this inscription can be considered "a struggle for visibility" and a possible way to preserve the artistic heritage from Israeli incursions, on the other it has universalizing and centrifugal consequences (Bshara 2013). This trend contrasts with on-the-ground localized heritage practices (Ibid.) and moves the spotlight away from local initiatives aimed at heritage protection and knowledge (Bshara 2013; De Cesari 2010).

The universalization of these sites has also resulted in increasing undesired attention on cultural heritage, as happened in Palmyra. Here Russia's incursion, which legitimized its involvement with the desire to protect the universal artistic heritage, degenerated into an increase in militarization (Russo & Giusti 2019). The growing militarization has been claimed as one of the causes for a greater concentration on these territories by ISIS, recalled by the strategic and symbolic nature of the site (Ibid.) Finally, the foreign incursion of Palmyra has made it clear how the protection of cultural heritage can be exploited to assert control over new territories and conceal personal interests (Ibid.).

This leads to the third ethical question that this section aims to address. It is now clear that targeting a community's artistic heritage has strong repercussions on the community itself in terms of identity and memory. Bevan defined this process as a genocidal or ethnic cleansing mechanism (Bevan 2007). However, as in the case of Palmyra, the protection of artistic heritage can be exploited, failing the idea that its protection is ultimately instrumental for the survival of a community (understood as a community with traditions, culture, and spaces for aggregation). This point raises new challenges to the complete overlap of cultural protection and human protection, as in Bokova's narrative when she defines attacks on cultural heritage as "crimes against humanity". Two questions arise spontaneously, and for which new research would be necessary to analyze them adequately: What are the ethical reper□ussions of the apparent parity between human life and □ultural heritage? (Slim 2022; Sørensen & Viejo-Rose 2015) To what extent can the protection of cultural heritage during a humanitarian crisis be considered a Western luxury?

Conclusions

The two case studies are pivotal in understanding the securitizing evolution of cultural heritage and its effects in the Middle East. In Syria, this nexus has led to two transformations. First, the illegal trafficking of artifacts and its connection to self-financing activities have acquired the power to prolong the humanitarian crisis and influence dynamics that go beyond the protection of cultural heritage. Secondly, the deliberate destruction of monuments has been more closely linked to human destruction. This assimilation has been brought forward by institutional employment of terms like "cultural cleansing", "war crime", and "cultural terrorism" to refer to the destruction of cultural heritage. The result is a persuasive securitization of art, which legitimizes increasingly dangerous actions (e.g. Russian intervention in Palmyra). In Palestine, the securitization of artistic heritage has been embedded in a more complex process of colonialism. The survival of Palestinian artistic heritage is inexorably linked to the Palestinian physical connection to the land (Silberman 2001), threatening the realization of "a land without a people for a people without a land." Israeli attacks on the historic centers of Palestine, such as Hebron, Nablus, and Bethlehem have become a tool not only to erase the collective memory of the communities but also to legitimize the stance on new territories (Bleibleh & Awad 2020).

By encompassing these case studies this paper investigated the evolution of the role of artistic heritage in armed conflicts and shed light on three recent challenges - namely, the friction between local and universal, the growth of unwanted attention, and the connection between human and cultural survival. The ethical considerations that these challenges bring to light complicate the study of the heritage-security nexus and call for future critical analyses of the interconnection between militarization and art.

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