

## 'This Happened to Us for the Second Time': War-preparedness, Risk, Responsibility and the Evacuation of Donbas Museums in 2022

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### Abstract

Museums in Ukraine's Donbas region have endured a protracted war since 2014: many were occupied, looted, and re-established in Ukrainian government-controlled territory, leaving behind collections. Against the backdrop of the events of 2014, this paper offers a brief analysis of how museums attempted to safeguard and evacuate their collections when Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Identifying key factors behind the widespread lack of successful evacuations, the paper touches on the social and financial cost of contingency planning, the distribution of responsibilities and resources, institutional bottlenecks, and altered perceptions of risk in war-affected areas.

**Key words:** Ukraine, Donbas, museum evacuation, war, contingency planning

### Introduction

In 2014, during the Russian incursion into Ukraine's Donbas region that led to the establishment of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, many museums and their collections sustained significant damage. A number of them were shelled and cases of looting and the capture of premises have been documented. Staff members were often pressured into cooperation with the separatist forces; some complied willingly, some resisted. Many left the region. The fate of cultural property that fell under the control of the separatists remains largely unknown.<sup>1</sup> After the second Minsk agreement, when the line of contact was stabilized and fighting was reduced, several occupied museums were re-established in government-controlled territories *de jure*. This generally meant the original legal entity would be dissolved and a regional, often branch, museum would become a legal successor of the original institution that remained under occupation. In most cases, their collections had to be left behind but displaced staff members would often be rehired.

In February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, the Donbas immediately became a key theatre of war again. In many ways, what happened repeated the events of 2014 but amidst a faster, more brutal ground offensive, within a hugely escalated, much more intense war. Central state institutions were heavily affected in the first 1.5 months, while Kyiv was the target of a simultaneous ground offensive – unlike eight years prior, national state institutions now had to work under pressure similar to what their colleagues in the Donbas experienced. Throughout this period, museums across the country were damaged. Around 40 were looted by autumn 2022;<sup>2</sup> the Ministry of Culture and other state bodies had to scramble to mitigate these issues. Although full-scale war had been preceded by protracted military escalation in 2021, raising alarms internationally both in the diplomatic sphere and in the media, many museums were not much better equipped to safeguard their collections than they had been eight years earlier, most notably in the Donbas. This short exploration identifies key factors that contributed to this lack of preparation.

While a comprehensive reconstruction of what happened is yet to be carried out, this provisional, bottom-up assessment points to a convergence of key legal, financial, and bureaucratic challenges that museums faced at the beginning of the full-scale invasion. I

describe the events from the perspective of museum directors and staff, supplemented by testimonies of municipal actors and activists working in local and international NGOs that have been instrumental in evacuation efforts. I restrict my analysis to public institutions: there are many factory museums in the region and a number of privately owned museums, but since they are not subject to state-organized rescue missions, and their holdings are not Ukrainian state property, the legal and bureaucratic dilemmas their staff members face are rather different. In addition, I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of state policy here. We know from deputy minister Kateryna Chuyeva that, as of April 2023, approximately 200,000 museum objects have been evacuated with the support of the Ministry but, due to the lack in frontline territories of personnel, capacity, and financial resources, challenges remain substantial.<sup>3</sup> Communication from the Ministry of Culture indicates that due to security issues, much of the Ministry's work since February 2022 has been conducted without public announcements, so a full analysis will have to wait until transparency is restored.

Here I attempt to explore the dilemmas and challenges of institutions removed physically and symbolically from the centre of the country. The Donbas, with its experience of separatist movements, armed conflict, and years of living in the proximity of a near-frozen conflict after the second Minsk Agreement of 2015, provides an important perspective on Ukraine's response to the wartime destruction of museums. This experience distinguishes local museums from their peers in Ukraine in how they might have thought about and prepared for the possibility of escalation.<sup>4</sup> They knew the dangers of occupation and the dilemmas it had brought to the territories under separatist control since 2014. The region was geographically exposed both in the sense of bordering on Russia and in the sense of being divided by the frontline between government-controlled territories and the so-called 'peoples' republics'.

Contrary to its geopolitical centrality, in terms of its cultural heritage and museums, the Donbas has been widely perceived as a peripheral part of Ukraine (Portnov 2016): as an industrial region, it was often thought to have little cultural heritage (Sklokina and Kulikov 2021) and weak civil society (Szymańska 2022).<sup>5</sup> This changed somewhat with the growing interest in the presence of European capital investments in the history of early industrialization but stereotypes remain strong.

War reinforces existing heritage hierarchies, pushing states to prioritize heritage deemed the most valuable in a context where on-the-ground protection of most less valuable items remains practically impossible. Priorities for rescue and protection are articulated within existing institutional infrastructures, leaving less prestigious or unofficial heritage in a more vulnerable position than recognized national treasures.

Besides major factors like logistics and on-the-ground conditions, such institutional hierarchies and the lower prestige of Donbas museums in the eyes of the central state might have been a factor in their response. The destruction of local heritage in such a highly contested region that is subject to revisionist claims about its history and identity by the invading Russian state is nevertheless detrimental. I analyze the 2022 events against the backdrop of 2014, asking how long-term exposure to war changed the sector and what sort of structural continuities prevailed that determined the options available for museum staff. This has important bearings for cultural policy in conflict zones, as well as for individual and institutional responsibility in and beyond Ukraine.

This paper is based on 22 interviews taken between April and August 2022, together with an additional three conducted by my colleague Victoria Donovan. The majority were recorded but, due to the security situation, some people requested a notes-only approach and/or anonymity. Besides interviews, I spent two months in Ukraine, mostly working with displaced professionals and civic organizations operating from Kyiv and Lviv. I have followed professional conversations and conferences online as well by monitoring media (including social media) focusing on state and municipal bodies, heritage professionals, museums, Ukrainian organizations and international associations active in museum rescue efforts.

### **Donbas museums 2014: from occupation to relocation**

Armed violence in the Donbas started in the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution that ousted pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. In the ensuing weeks, anti-Maidan

protests sprung up across the country, mostly in the south and the east, where many of the key economic sectors were held by pro-Russian political-economic networks and where Soviet-era industrialization had contributed to more Russified, Sovietized local identities than in the country's west and centre. Local pro-Maidan protests took place as well but on a smaller scale (Risch 2021). When Russia annexed Crimea in early 2014, separatist voices gained momentum in the Donetsk and Luhansk region. Between April and July 2014, a significant portion of the region was occupied by separatist militias, with substantial covert support from the Russian army and secret services. The Ukrainian army successfully recovered some of these territories and, in February 2015, the second Minsk agreement led to the containment of the conflict, though not the end of armed violence (for an overview of the events in the Donbas see Marples 2021, and Arel and Driscoll 2023; for the Minsk process, see, for instance, Åtland 2020).

After the annexation of Crimea, the Ministry of Culture instructed museums to create priority lists of items to be evacuated from their collections and to take measures for war preparedness. The majority of the steps they took at the time were restricted to interventions that could facilitate museum work in the eventuality of armed conflict without incurring large expenses: cataloguing and planning were prioritized instead of measures like the distribution of packaging materials or vehicles, even in frontline areas. Although attempts were made to update records concerning the conditions of museums in Eastern Ukraine, and priority lists for evacuation were compiled, no comprehensive policy was adopted to facilitate war preparedness in frontline regions.

Vasyl Rozhko from the recently established NGO Heritage Rescue Initiative, who worked for the Ministry of Culture between 2014 and 2016, told me that the Ministry had little awareness of what was going on in small museums of the Donbas in early 2014. Many museums had no up-to-date catalogue of their holdings and digital catalogues were a rarity. Ministry staff rarely had direct contact with small museums: they communicated in a vertical regime, with regional state administrations and larger museums collecting information and passing it upward to central offices.<sup>6</sup> When, in early spring of 2014, anti-Maidan protests escalated in the east and south of Ukraine, the Ministry of Culture did send a delegation to the Donbas, urging museum directors to pack up their exhibitions and close the museums. This was the initiative of a working group of volunteers within the Ministry who formed an expert group that wanted to provide emergency support to museums. They were in contact with the regional administration in the Donbas as well but their warnings were not enough to ensure that museums prepared.<sup>7</sup> It was one thing to identify objects for evacuation or in situ safekeeping, to organize a few training sessions for staff about safe storage; however, without logistical support and equipment, these activities could only offer a limited level of mitigation.

These interventions did not reach every museum, partly due to the vertical organization of the sector: if the leadership at a methodological centre (a museum that oversees the curatorial strategy and institutional policy of smaller museums in the vicinity) did not pass information to smaller museums under their remit, those institutions were left in the dark. Without a consistent policy that would have entailed dedicated funding and quick interventions, the extent to which the Ministry's requests were taken into consideration depended on individual museum directors. If they wanted to do more than to prepare the requested lists, they had to free up funding or seek additional resources themselves. The armed conflict came in a rapid and unexpected fashion for most of them and they were caught off-guard.

When separatists seized power in a given location, museums were high on their agenda; after occupying the local administration and key public institutions, militias often went to museums, attempting to co-opt the leadership and overtaking the premises.<sup>8</sup> In the Donetsk region, 29 out of 59 museums were occupied (Kutska et al. 2022: 566); in the Luhansk region, 20 out of 36.<sup>9</sup> Many museum buildings were damaged in artillery strikes, notably the Donetsk Regional History Museum, where 26 of 29 exhibition halls were damaged in August 2014. Looting was prevalent. In a notable case, the Donetsk Museum of WWII was looted by separatist militias, who seized old weapons, including tanks. Willingly or reluctantly, a number of staff members in most museums cooperated. The exact role of ideological conviction, fear, or personal circumstances remains to be understood, but interviewees who keep in touch with former colleagues have mentioned all of these reasons.<sup>10</sup>

In subsequent years, many museums that remained in occupied territories were 're-located' – transferred *de jure* – to cities under government control, mostly under new leadership. The Luhansk Regional History Museum, for instance, had a branch in Starobilsk and, once the contact line between the government- and separatist-held areas stabilized, the museum was legally re-registered there. The collection of Starobilsk District Museum became the core of the new collection, as the old holdings remained in Luhansk, where most of the old leadership chose to cooperate with the separatist government. Olesya Milovanova, the Starobilsk museum director, was appointed as the head and the new Luhansk Regional History Museum started to expand its collection, focusing on contemporary events, notably the ongoing war.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, the Donetsk Regional History Museum was *de jure* relocated to Kramatorsk, its collection staying behind. A notable exception is that of the Stanytsia-Luhanska Museum of Local History, where heavy shelling damaged some exhibits, although staff members managed to hide much of the collection in bomb shelters and to evacuate objects to Ukraine-controlled Starobilsk in December 2015.<sup>12</sup>

The appointment of a group of new museum directors, who not only had explicit loyalty to Ukraine but were often active in civil society organizations beyond the museum sector, was an important consequence of the Donbas war, when such networks proved to be crucial.<sup>13</sup> Often, as in the case of Milovanova, new appointments took place in the re-registered museums in government-controlled Donbas. The experience of losing collections and institutional cohesion, countered by the establishment of new, often more dynamic museums and the consolidation of stronger country-wide networks, is central to this period. These eight years brought immense losses but also unprecedented initiatives and revivals.

Activities like developing new narratives and exhibitions with contemporary themes such as the ongoing war, together with the need to rethink collections, pushed many directors to alter how they thought about the mission of their institutions. While this arose out of necessity and is partly due to the relatively smaller financial value of their collections, this fluidity is an important trend to note.

The beginning of the separatist war brought an upsurge of interest in the Donbas across Ukraine, which translated into more funding within the cultural sector, mostly through third-sector organizations, international grants, and new channels of state funding. The core funding that museums received from the state remained quite low and salaries were precarious, so the only way museum directors could initiate substantial changes was through project work or the occasional successful cooperation with regional or municipal administrations under whom they operated.

In the Donbas museum sector, Museum Open for Renovation (*Muzey Vidkryto na Remont*), a project funded by, among others, the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, was among the most formative in the 2016-2022 period. During its three projects, 31 museums won support for physical renovations, workshops and staff training.<sup>14</sup> The most important aspect of their work was the slow process of building trust with museums, especially smaller museums that hitherto hardly ever participated in nationwide initiatives and often did not trust state officials and civic activists. This impression was echoed by historian Volodymyr Kulikov, who did research in Donbas-based museums in the mid-2010s. He discovered that, as a representative of a Lviv-based research NGO, he had more difficulties gaining trust than when he used his credentials as an academic from a Kharkiv university (Kharkiv is the largest nearby city in Eastern Ukraine, where many museum professionals go to study).<sup>15</sup> Staff from Slovyansk Local History Museum, Luhansk Regional History Museum, and the History Museum in Pokrovsk were among those who mentioned Museum Open for Renovation as a formative influence on their work – and, as I will clarify below, this influence proved crucial after the 2022 invasion.

Many reported not only the development of a strong professional network outside of the Donbas in this period but also the growth of cooperation between museums within the region. New directors who worked in methodological centres reported that they switched from phone-based communication to more frequent in-person visits, realizing the importance of trust across levels of management. Overall, in the interviews I conducted, museum professionals reported stronger and more active professional links within the sector in Ukraine-controlled Donbas after 2014. However, the return of lost collections was out of the question and museums

still operated under financial precarity, with low salaries and not much financial support from the state to prepare for a possible escalation.

### War-preparedness and war-fatigue in the centre and at the periphery

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine came after a protracted escalation in two waves in 2021. In spring, when Russian troops came in unprecedented numbers to the Ukrainian border to conduct training exercises, many were alarmed about the future. The Ministry of Culture did take measures to assess the war preparedness of Ukrainian museums. Many directors I spoke to reported that in the year prior to the invasion, they received a questionnaire from the Ministry of Culture inquiring about their needs, whether they had the funds and equipment necessary to store or evacuate collections, and whether they had appropriate bomb shelters. Instructions were sent to create priority lists of the most valuable items in their collections. But, according to the directors, there was no follow-up.

In contrast to reports from frontline museums, Cathleen Hoeniger's recent interviews with Kyiv-based museum professionals suggest that many prestigious institutions maintained close contact with the Ministry of Culture. In 2022, museum directors she spoke to had 'secret plans' for the eventuality of an invasion, devised in cooperation with the Ministry (Hoeniger 2022: 33). My interview with the director of the Kharkiv Literature Museum indicates similarly efficient contact with the Ministry. She received permission online to evacuate, having spoken to the Ministry directly.<sup>16</sup> Staff of the local Culture Department left and Tetiana Pylypchuk succeeded in evacuating the collection, relying on the support of the military and the Ukrainian railway company Ukrzaliznytsia.<sup>17</sup>

Pylypchuk's actions were informed by a long-term proactive stance: in the months before the invasion, when Russian troops moved close to the Ukrainian border, she purchased packaging materials and determined which were the most important items to be saved. She was guided by a sense that, with its valuable Ukrainian-language manuscripts that testify to the Ukrainian history of Kharkiv, her museum would be a high-priority target.<sup>18</sup> Although the Kharkiv Literature Museum is not a national museum, it is widely recognized as a uniquely important institution in Ukraine and Pylypchuk's sentiment was likely shared by the Ministry; her proactive stance and the political will of the state were both important factors in her success.

Further away from the centre, besides the national museums and a select few institutions in historic cities like Lviv or Kharkiv, the picture seems rather different, both when it comes to the steps taken in 2014 and in the period right before and since the full-scale war. The difference has structural reasons. Most national museums are directly managed by the Ministry of Culture, while the majority of museums are managed by the culture departments of their respective local or regional administrations, which, in turn, maintain contact with the Ministry. The collection of any state museum is communal property that belongs under the Ukrainian Museum Fund (*Muzeynyi Fond Ukrayiny*), managed by the Ministry of Culture. In other words, most museums have a direct and an indirect link to the Ministry. Acquisitions or restoration work – and certainly evacuations – are subject to the Ukrainian Museum Fund's decisions, while in terms of organizational management, the Ministry is involved only through overseeing the work of the local or regional administration.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, museums as collections of objects that constitute state property are of immediate ministerial concern, while most museums as organizations are not. However, in evacuations, contingency planning, or *in situ* protection, organizations and objects are impossible to separate. This translates into a bottleneck in contexts as urgent as war; while culture departments of local organizations are available and maintain close contact with the museums they manage, they are not authorized to make decisions concerning collections. When fast decision making and on-the-ground awareness are vital, this centralization disempowers both museum leadership and local administrations and prevents them from taking lawful rescue initiatives. Simultaneously, it places an enormous burden on the central state.

Hoeniger (2022: 33) identifies 'the cumbersome structure for heritage administration in the federal government and civil service; [...] inadequate funding for protective measures, [...] and a lack of impetus for the funding and implementation of anti-aerial protection' as key reasons for the delays in contingency planning in World War II Italy. Although, according to Hoeniger, this is in stark contrast to what happened in Ukraine, I think these are all factors

that contributed to the challenges most museums faced both in the months of escalating tensions and since the start of the full-scale war.

The Ukrainian government chose a policy of caution in the months prior to the invasion, wary of the consequences of widespread panic. This meant that even high-ranking state officials were kept in the dark about the actual likelihood of a major escalation.<sup>20</sup> Some high-profile museums, especially national museums, might have had informal conversations with clued-in or simply cautious state officials, and a number of Donbas-based museum directors told me they had been in touch with SBU, the Ukrainian Secret Services, throughout the winter, but most did not have a clear sense of the scale of the risk. No central policy was communicated and no general instructions arrived from the Ministry; it was up to each museum's leadership whether they took active measures.

As a director from a museum in Slovyansk said: 'This happened to us for the second time. [...] Yes, let's prepare. You can prepare, [they tell us] it all depends on you. There [in the Donbas] we were already exhausted from waiting'.<sup>21</sup> The proximity of the frontline, paradoxically, seems to have distorted many people's ability to assess the risk of escalation: having lived with a near-frozen conflict at their doorstep for almost a decade, their readiness took the shape of a vague anticipation, even as Russian troops marched to the border.

The protracted, low-intensity war in the Donbas placed Ukraine under significant economic and political pressure between 2014 and 2022; while in key sectors like the military, major reforms were undertaken and spending was restructured, this did not happen in the museum sector, which remained underfunded. Although several new museums were opened or scheduled to be opened, including prestige projects like the Maidan Museum in Kyiv and the Museum of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Dnipro, neither ensuring museum safety nor spending for contingency measures were undertaken in a systematic fashion, even in territories near the frontline. Instead, it seems that only tentative measures were taken; these included training sessions, publications like evacuation and packaging guides, occasional surveys to assess museums' needs, and informal communication. A comprehensive assessment of ministerial policy has yet to be undertaken but the experience of Donbas museum staff certainly points towards a lack of contingency planning.

Cases like Pylypchuk's Kharkiv Literature Museum, the Mystetskyi Arsenal, the Museum of Book Printing in Kyiv, and several museums in Lviv, especially the Sheptytskyi National Museum and the Museum of the History of World Religions<sup>22</sup> comprise a minority. Geographic distance from the theatre of war, access to the Ministry, directorial leadership, and proactive contingency planning are all crucial factors behind their success stories. Pylypchuk reflected on the lessons she learned from 2014 events and how they shaped her directorial strategy in the subsequent years – the relative proximity of Kharkiv to the Donbas meant, to her mind, that escalation had to be taken seriously.<sup>23</sup> She was removed enough not to have lived through serious threats of separatism and armed conflict; still, Kharkiv was close enough to the Donbas for a threat of escalation to be a remote possibility. In contrast, everyone I spoke to in Kyiv and Lviv, even those who counted on re-escalation, admitted they did not expect a full-scale war.

It is not unique to Ukraine that the histories of conflict fail to equip museums for war. The start of the Iraq war was not foreseen by the profession (Al Radi 2003) and the country's recent experience of war did not lead to museums adopting new policies in terms of cataloguing or evacuation routes. Donny George Youkhanna, a senior staff member of the National Museum in Baghdad, states that in the aftermath of three wars in Iraq, museums still lack up-to-date, comprehensive catalogues of their holdings (Youkhanna 2010: 7), which would constitute a baseline safety measure. The rescue of the Timbuktu manuscripts in Mali was the result of individual initiatives rather than comprehensive policy measures (Commisso 2015). Wars and their economic pressures left the cultural sector underfunded. Even with the slower onset of WWII, state capacity to save museum collections was restricted to the most precious items: in France, valuable items from the Louvre and other major museums were moved to countryside estates (Campbell Karlsgodt 2011: 71), and similar measures were taken in Britain (McCamley 2003: 81). Existing hierarchies are difficult to contest in these contexts, leaving less valued items vulnerable to looting.

## The 2022 invasion: dilemmas of risk and responsibility

Quite a few museum directors I interviewed did not take radical precautionary measures in the year before the invasion. They might have prepared priority lists and had rough contingency plans but they felt that it was a faulty strategy to prioritize spending on something that might not happen. Their immediate working conditions were far from ideal; investing in ongoing exhibitions or equipment made more sense. Their calculations turned out to be wrong but it is difficult to deny the validity of their reasoning. They could not afford such costs when their day-to-day functioning was already precarious. It is probably not an exaggeration to claim that the long-term underfunding of the cultural sector in Ukraine, combined with the lack of dedicated spending even as the risk of conflict increased, contributed to the lack of appropriate preparation. These negative circumstances shaped the rationales that guided managers' decisions about how to spend their limited funds. Moreover, individual directors operated in a structure where high levels of responsibility were rarely matched by managerial and financial autonomy (see Vonnák 2020).

Only a handful of public museums in the Donbas managed to evacuate their collections successfully and, with the ongoing warfare in the region, it seems unlikely that any *in situ* measures will be sufficient. This comes down to various factors and it is worth noting that in comparable contexts, the rescue of entire collections amidst the kind of war that is being waged in Ukraine has been considered impossible and hence rejected as a policy goal (Legnér 2022).

Indeed, some interviewees mentioned that they had been mocked by colleagues and friends for taking preventative steps early on. In the prolonged uncertainty of late 2021 and early 2022, many held onto hopes of normalcy. In such an environment, pessimistic actions such as preparations or active contingency planning often came with significant social costs. Had the war not escalated, cautious staff might have been called out for diverting funds from the ongoing affairs of their institutions. Even Pylypchuk noted that they did not have enough packing crates in the Kharkiv Literature Museum, due to the fact that in 2020-2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic they had to switch to a fully online environment, which entailed purchasing new equipment that allowed streaming and online exhibitions.<sup>24</sup> In less well-endowed museums in the Donbas, deciding what to purchase might have posed an even more difficult dilemma.

Those directors who had serious contingency plans and erred on the safe side in the winter months were in a much better position to save their collections – but even such measures often turned out to be insufficient. Those who acted proactively, purchasing packaging materials, finalizing priority lists – some even closing their exhibitions and boxing at least the most valuable items – had varying success in evacuation efforts in the first weeks of war. In some cases, the ground offensive was fast enough to prevent rescue vehicles from leaving. With a permit from the Ministry in hand and items already packed, some institutions did stand a chance, especially further from the line of control.

Other collections were evacuated later by civic initiatives, as I will discuss below. Olesya Milovanova from Luhansk Regional History Museum had packed the most important items and was ready to leave. She had called Olha Honchar, the current director of the Territory of Terror Museum in Lviv, a recently established municipal museum that thematizes Nazi and Soviet deportations and forced labour. She asked Honchar whether storage space might be available there. Honchar's museum is managed by the Lviv municipality, so she could contact the nearby city administration immediately. Honchar quickly received a green light to free up storage for the Luhansk collection. However, the permission to evacuate that Milovanova was expecting from the Ministry did not arrive. Overnight, Russian tanks were in the streets of Starobilsk. The museum had no vehicles of its own and in the chaos of those first days it was impossible to request anything of the sort from the central state. Milovanova did not risk taking items without permission; it would have been impossible to distinguish this legally from looting.<sup>25</sup> She would have criminal liability if she attempted to evacuate the museum's collection of her own accord.

As in the preceding years, when war preparedness came down to individual decision-making strategies, without dedicated funding or a clear directive to refer to in case of an escalation, directors found themselves in an impossible position. Should they leave their collections behind, or should they risk evacuating them, a decision that could lead to court if

anything went wrong? Granting blanket permission to directors to evacuate would have had serious risks of its own: both theft and collaboration with the enemy would have been difficult to prevent. But less hierarchical structures, more and better communication in the months prior to the full-scale invasion, and the temporary outsourcing of decision-making to local and regional administrations might have reduced the damage.

Another director we interviewed, whom I will call Tkach, based in a museum in a city 80 kilometres west of Donetsk, took measures similar to Milovanova's. She made priority lists and ensured that the most valuable objects were packed. In the weeks before the invasion, she repeatedly reached out to the Ministry, and on 24 February she had the permissions she needed. That Tkach eventually succeeded in evacuating the collection was partly due to these measures. However, her city is much further west of the former line of control than Starobilsk and the additional time her institution had before the Russian ground offensive was likely an equally important factor in their ability to move the collection.<sup>26</sup>

### **Horizontal networks: civic initiatives and NGOs in the rescue effort**

During my visit to Lviv in June 2022, while interviewing activists of the military support NGO Lvivskyi Lytsar who were involved in transporting packaging material to museums in Eastern Ukraine,<sup>27</sup> I met a museum director and a researcher from a museum in Slovyansk. They were waiting for a minibus, hoping to return to the Donbas to evacuate at least some of their collection. They had not managed to do so in February; they had prepared priority lists but had not packed items. They rescued some items in March but more had to be saved. They were going to take boxes and packaging materials with them from Lviv to get everything ready for evacuation. According to their assessment, evacuation was the best option: fighting was not likely to subside, the city could be occupied, and by that time, they had secured a permit from the Ministry to get them through checkpoints.

The only available bus had broken down and been taken to be repaired. Finding a driver was not easy: 'all those whom I could have called are fighting already, now all these people who pretended they wanted to help us say they cannot do it', a volunteer told me on site. Driving to Slovyansk came with huge risks so the absence of willing candidates was not entirely surprising. Ultimately, the director and the researcher drove the ramshackle minibus themselves when it was in a decent enough state to depart.

The museum directed by Tkach succeeded in evacuating their collection with the help of activists they came to know years earlier through Museum Open for Renovation. Since the full-scale Russian invasion, the organization has used its extensive network in the Donbas to facilitate evacuations. Much of the international aid, including packaging materials, arrives in hubs like Lviv and Kyiv and it is a challenge to distribute items to regions further east and south, especially near the frontline. As an activist stressed, even simple tasks like packaging items safely are complex jobs that require specialist knowledge; something that might be appropriate for the short term can be unsafe for long-term storage. Likewise, organic and inorganic materials must be treated differently. For example, polyethylene is widely available but no organic item can be wrapped in the material.<sup>28</sup>

These two examples are a fraction of the grassroots initiatives that sprung up from the ground, especially in more remote areas. Museum Crisis Centre is another initiative that builds on professional ties established while participating in Museum Open for Renovation projects. With years of work with Museum Open for Renovation, Olha Honchar had a wide network of museum professionals in the Donbas. In March 2022, she established Museum Crisis Centre to organize help for the professional community across the country. Soon, many contacts she had in the Donbas sought her support.<sup>29</sup> Honchar stresses that years of building local grassroots networks allows them to operate in areas where state capacity and political will remain insufficient to ensure the safety of collections or the survival of staff.

Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI), a similar project, was initiated by museum professionals Vasyl Rozhko, head of the NGO Tustan, and Ihor Poshyvailo, director of the Maidan Museum. While Honchar's Museum Crisis Centre focuses on small, regional museums, often supporting staff as much as collections, HERI is involved in protection efforts that concern both built heritage and museums, libraries, archives, and cultural centres. HERI

documents destroyed monuments and is creating a digital infrastructure for heritage data.

What connects both, and several similar initiatives across the country, is their capacity to function as bridges between the state and international actors as well as the third sector. Headed by museum professionals who work in state institutions and know how to navigate bureaucratic and institutional complexities, they can also cooperate with local or international actors, receiving funds without going through the bureaucracy governing public museums. Thanks to their versatility, these NGOs and initiatives have emerged as central players in rescue efforts, channelling international aid to workers and collections. Actors like the Ministry of Culture are too large to move fast or address concerns of last-mile institutions. At the same time, actors like Museum Crisis Centre and HERI would lack the insider perspective about problems and needs if they were not connected to state-run museums. The interconnectedness created by overlapping personnel working for these initiatives and state institutions seems to be a crucial element in why they have proven so versatile and successful in a context where state action alone often fails.

The effectiveness of these NGOs stands out when one considers that in small, regional museums like the Donbas museums I discuss, away from the priorities of the central state, museum professionals operate under significant pressure, often undertaking risky missions to rescue collections from near the frontline. This often involves securing permits from the state, obtaining funding through lobbying work and fundraising, as well as the logistics and execution of high-risk trips across a country heavily affected by war. The bulk of this work since the onset of the war has been facilitated by 'bridge' actors; in a sense, the ongoing rescue work in Ukrainian museums could be read as the museum sector self-organizing through a set of interconnected citizen initiatives, which support the state while filling the gaps it fails to address.

## Conclusion

Although the Ukrainian museum sector underwent reforms after 2014, not much had been done prior to 2022 in terms of comprehensive policies of war preparedness and contingency planning. Although there are indications that the Ministry of Culture had taken substantial steps to secure the collections of institutions that house the country's most valuable heritage, the majority of museums seem to have received only limited guidance and no extra funds. Culture departments of local and regional administrations responsible for the management of museums do not seem to have been instructed to provide such support, logistical assistance, or equipment. Although training did take place, information booklets were distributed, and needs were surveyed, by and large it was down to individual museums to prepare for the eventuality of escalation.

These developments should be understood in the context of the long-term underfunding of the museum sector in Ukraine, where salaries remain low and institutional budgets are meagre. Active precautionary measures would have incurred costs that competed with funds available for the day-to-day activities of these institutions, both for the central state and for individual museums. On top of this, in the context of Ukraine-controlled Donbas, where people had lived with a near-frozen war and hence an uncertain future, preparing for an escalation was widely regarded as overreaction.

It is difficult to claim with confidence that different policy measures could have translated into successful *en masse* protection of portable cultural heritage in the Donbas. In a sense, only steps taken before 24 February 2022 could have granted full protection to heritage, especially without endangering staff. The asymmetry of the central state's capacity to offer protection in these conditions, and the lack of an autonomous legal mandate for officials at territorial administrations and museum directors to take action, did not help evacuation efforts and protection measures. The way responsibility was left in the hands of individuals both prior to the invasion and at the onset of war clearly endangered collections and placed unfair demands on museum directors. In addition, due to disruptions in communications and the slowness of bureaucratic processes, staff could rarely take action without being criminally liable. These factors contributed to the enormous difficulties museums faced when safeguarding their collections. The gargantuan efforts many undertook to protect their collections and workers

should be appreciated in light of these challenging circumstances.

The experience of these museums is in line with the observations of international organizations that have worked with war-affected heritage professionals. As the Dutch NGO Cultural Emergency Response states, 'accessing hard-to-reach places, particularly in a crisis like Ukraine's, depends entirely on established personal connections'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, such existing networks enabled fast communication and the establishment of new dedicated response organizations like HERI or Museum Crisis Centre. A recent policy report commissioned by the European Parliament observes that the lack of preparatory measures is among the most significant obstacles to efficient rescue measures in armed conflict contexts (Campfens et al. 2023: 66), so this bears relevance elsewhere as well.

As I observed, the cost of addressing risk in the Donbas competed with the daily functioning of already underfunded institutions. In this, too, what happened in the Donbas echoes experiences from Mali, Iraq, or Afghanistan. To build communities and institutions that can better respond to conflict and disaster in Ukraine and beyond, it would be crucial to adopt an approach that integrates the protection of heritage professionals with the safeguarding of objects. Investing in professional networks is certainly a step towards both. But all these efforts will be limited as long as inadequate funding for culture remains an aspect of state policy.

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### Notes

- 1 Since the full-scale invasion, there are indications that many objects have been taken to the Russian Federation; see, for example, Jeffrey Gettleman and Oleksandra Mykoloshyn, 'As Russians Steal Ukraine's Art, They Attack Its Identity, Too', *The New York Times* 14 January 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/14/world/asia/ukraine-art-russia-steal.html>, accessed 31 January 2023.
- 2 Hanna Arhirova, "'War Crime:' Industrial-scale Destruction of Ukraine Culture', *AP News* 9 October 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-travel-museums-7431f2190d917f44f76dff39b4d5df54>, accessed 9 June 2023.
- 3 Kateryna Chuyeva, Milena Chorna, Alexandra Fiebig and Kateryna Goncharova, 'Cultural Heritage in Ukraine: Inside the Race to Safeguard the Irreplaceable', *World Monuments Fund* online event 21 April 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFnQTfvZok>, accessed 9 June 2023.
- 4 Apart from the Donbas, the experience of Crimean museum professionals could have been an interesting comparative example; however, due to difficulties of access, and because of the absence of armed violence there (due to the mostly bloodless annexation and the peninsula's *de facto* incorporation into Russia), I chose to restrict this paper to the experiences of Donbas museums in Ukraine-controlled territories.
- 5 These prejudices have been mentioned in several interviews with non-local professionals; Volodymyr Kulikov, interview by author, digital recording, 17 July 2022, online; Olha Honchar, interview by author, digital recording, 7 June 2022, Lviv, Ukraine.
- 6 Vasyly Rozhko, Heritage Rescue Initiative, interview by author, digital recording, 18 August

- 14 Diána Vonnák, '*This Happened to Us for the Second Time*': *War-preparedness, Risk, Responsibility and the Evacuation of Donbas Museums in 2022*  
2022, Lviv, Ukraine.
- 7 Ihor Poshyvailo, Heritage Rescue Initiative, Maidan Museum, interview by author, digital recording, 3 August 2022, Kyiv, Ukraine; Vasyl Rozhko, interview, 18 August 2022. Poshyvailo discusses this period in his talk: Ihor Poshyvailo, 'Addressing the Conflict-affected Heritage in Ukraine: Challenges and Responses,' National Memorial Complex of the Heavenly Hundred Heroes – Museum of the Revolution of Dignity 2020. <https://www.maidanmuseum.org/en/node/1065>, accessed 9 June 2023.
- 8 Olesya Milovanova, Luhansk Regional History Museum, interview by author, digital recording, 15 July 2022, online; staff member of a museum in Slovyansk, interview by author, notes, 28 May 2022, Lviv, Ukraine.
- 9 Olesya Milovanova, interview, 15 July 2022.
- 10 Olesya Milovanova, interview, 15 July 2022; Mykhaylo Vlaikov, Luhansk Regional History Museum, interview by author, digital recording, 14 July 2022, online.
- 11 Olesya Milovanova, interview, 15 July 2022.
- 12 Olha Honchar, 'Станиця-Луганська: музей під прицілом' ['Stanytsia-Luhanska: Museum under Attack'], Na Chasi 16 May 2017. <https://nachasi.com/creative/2017/05/16/stanytsya-luganska/>, accessed: 30 January 2023.
- 13 Yevheniya Kalugina from Slovyansk Local History Museum, who previously worked in a citizen inclusion organization, is a good example but many interviewees mentioned the realities of the new 'project culture' that required a new style of leadership. Although many welcomed grant application opportunities, this appreciation often stems from a resignation towards the state, and does not count on the possibility of changing the overall funding of the cultural sector in Ukraine.
- 14 Activist 'Morozov', interview by author, notes, 3 May 2022, online; Olha Honchar, interview, 7 June 2022.
- 15 Volodymyr Kulikov, interview, 15 June 2022.
- 16 See also Ksenia Bilash, 'Музейна евакуація: що пішло не так?' ['Museum Evacuations: What Did Not Work Out?'], LB.ua 19 June 2022. [https://lb.ua/culture/2022/06/19/520455\\_muzeyna\\_evakuatsiya\\_shcho\\_pishlo\\_tak.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2022/06/19/520455_muzeyna_evakuatsiya_shcho_pishlo_tak.html), accessed 31 January 2023.
- 17 Tetiana Pylypchuk, Kharkiv Literature Museum, interview by author, digital recording, 15 July 2022, online. See also Bilash, 'Museum Evacuations'.
- 18 Tetiana Pylypchuk, interview, 15 July 2022.
- 19 Vonnák analyzed the origins of this centralized organizational structure and its challenges in the heritage sector in Ukraine; parallels between the protection of built heritage and portable cultural property are numerous (Vonnák 2020: 88-132).
- 20 Isabelle Khurshudyan, 'An Interview with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky', Washington Post 23 August 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/16/zelensky-interview-transcript/>, accessed 15 January 2023.
- 21 Yevgenia Kalugina, Sloviansk Local History Museum, interview by Victoria Donovan, digital recording, 25 May 2022, online.
- 22 Bernat Armangué, 'At Ukraine's Largest Art Museum, A Race to Protect Heritage', AP News, 6 March 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-travel-europe-art->

- [museums-museums-768ce266673b85965edc8367c2257370?fbclid=IwAR1gZ9qHLl-1bbtStu6r5WE4t-sQHZF19kQhKILsrDkADqwOtZUSVDY430](https://museums-museums-768ce266673b85965edc8367c2257370?fbclid=IwAR1gZ9qHLl-1bbtStu6r5WE4t-sQHZF19kQhKILsrDkADqwOtZUSVDY430), accessed 31 January 2023.
- 23 Tetiana Pylypchuk, interview, 15 July 2022.
- 24 Tetiana Pylypchuk, interview, 15 July 2022.
- 25 Olesya Milovanova, interview, 15 July 2022; Mykhaylo Vlaiikov, interview 14 July 2022; Olha Honchar, interview, 7 June 2022.
- 26 Tkach, interview by Victoria Donovan, digital recording, 10 May 2022, online.
- 27 Although Lvivskiy Lytsar was primarily established to support military action in the context of the Donbas war, its leadership includes Andriy Salyuk, the head of the Ukrainian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments (Ukrayinske tovasystvo okhorony pamyatok istoriyi ta kultury, UTOPIK), a Soviet-era civil society initiative (see Vonnak 2020: 130), who used the organization to mobilize aid for museum rescues. Andriy Salyuk, Lvivskiy Lytsar/UTOPIK, interview by author, digital recording, 7 June 2022, Lviv, Ukraine.
- 28 Activist 'Morozov', interview, 3 May 2022.
- 29 Olha Honchar, interview, 6 June 2022. See also Olha Honchar, 'Ми хочемо вижити, не вмерти з голоду і зберегти музейні експонати' ['We Want to Survive, Not Die From Hunger and to Save Museum Objects'], *Tvoe Misto* 26 September 2022. [https://tvoemisto.tv/blogs/my\\_hochemo\\_vyzhyty\\_tozh\\_musyly\\_vzyaty\\_na\\_sebe\\_rol\\_derzhavy\\_137745.html](https://tvoemisto.tv/blogs/my_hochemo_vyzhyty_tozh_musyly_vzyaty_na_sebe_rol_derzhavy_137745.html), accessed 1 February 2023; and Lisa Korneichuk, 'This Group Is Helping Museum Workers in Ukraine', *Hyperallergic* 23 March 2022. <http://hyperallergic.com/719347/this-group-is-helping-museum-workers-in-ukraine/>, accessed 6 February 2023.
- 30 Cultural Emergency Response, 'A War on Collective Memory', 29 November 2022. <https://www.culturalemergency.org/stories/a-war-on-collective-memory>, accessed 6 April 2023.

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