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Weaponising Cultural Heritage: The Use of Strategic Narratives in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has deliberately targeted the country's cultural heritage, including buildings, monuments, archives, libraries and museums. The intentional destruction of these custodians of memory and identity inspires this policy brief, which is guided by the following research question:

Why does Russia weaponise cultural heritage; more specifically, why does it engage in the destruction of Ukrainian heritage, despite being aware that such actions tend to reinforce Ukrainian identity and, thus, resilience?

To answer this question, this report begins by providing a conceptual background, exploring cultural heritage as a battleground through the notions of weaponisation, politicisation, militarisation, and securitisation. It then presents a Strategic Narrative Analysis (SNA) in two complementary steps: (1) a broad mapping of the narratives related to the destruction and looting of cultural heritage (macro-level analysis), revealing a wide range of narratives advanced by both Russia and Ukraine; and (2) an in-depth examination of the logic underpinning the dominant narratives, highlighting their interactive nature (meso-level analysis) and drawing attention to the gap between what is articulated and what is left unsaid (micro-level analysis). Addressing thus both the *what* question (which narratives are advanced) and the *how* question (how they are advanced), the report follows the traditional analytical sequence of SNA, linking content to practice.

As such, this report addresses the strategic logic behind heritage destruction in three stages: (1) a research phase mapping Russian and Ukrainian discourses on cultural heritage in the mentioned setting, drawing on SNA; (2) a feedback phase in which these discourses were discussed with policymakers and cultural heritage professionals during a tabletop exercise focused on a real-world scenario concerning Russian looting of museums in Kherson, aimed at incorporating practitioner perspectives into the analysis; and (3) a synthesis stage in which the findings were consolidated and translated into policy recommendations, resulting in this policy brief. While these activities were organised within the REKA framework, and in cooperation with the Dutch Ministry of Defence and the Clingendael Institute, the analysis and views expressed here are those of the authors alone.

1. Conceptual background: weaponisation, militarisation, politicisation and securitisation

Four concepts form the background against which this report should be read: weaponisation, militarisation, politicisation, and securitisation. These concepts have become prominent in policy and media discourse, particularly following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They are frequently used to describe the unexpected use of means and resources, such as food or energy, as instruments of war. Although often invoked interchangeably to capture such deviations, the literature emphasises the importance of distinguishing between them and their respective dynamics, as they correspond to different realities and, thus, require different remedial actions.

Weaponisation refers to the transformation of non-weapons into weapons, turning them into instruments that cause harm (Mattson, 2020). Often carrying an undertone of undesirability, the concept seeks to capture the deviation from what is considered normal, and thus expected, in conflict. Usually, but not always, this deviation occurs in an intentional, active and offensive manner. It covers material items, including the already mentioned food and energy, as well as ideational constructs such as ideas and narratives. In fact, the 'weaponisation of everything' is considered an important characteristic of modern conflict, meaning that 'everything' is now a potential weapon (Galeotti, 2022). The General Debate of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) serves as a powerful illustration, as Ukraine has repeatedly characterised Russian actions in terms of weaponisation in its statements (cf. Annex 1).

Weaponisation may dominate today's political discourse, but it is not new as a concept, as its origins can be traced back to the Cold War defence industry of the 1950s, where it was introduced to describe the integration of weapons, and more specifically tested missile prototypes, into a weapons system (Mattson, 2020). Various reasons help explain its current prominence (Galeotti, 2022; Mattson, 2020). Modern conflict extends beyond the use of conventional physical force. Moreover, it often involves actors other than states and tends to unfold in ambiguity, without a formal declaration of war. Contextual factors are also deemed important, though (Mousavizadeh, 2015; Mudie-Mantz & Werz, 2025). Unprecedented

technological developments create opportunities for weaponisation, while globalisation amplifies their potential impact. Moreover, systemic contestation, in which the Liberal International Order is increasingly challenged, can increase the risk of conflict and weaken efforts at prevention as well as management.

Militarisation refers to the process by which something originally intended for non-military use is repurposed for military use (Mattson, 2020). The heritage example of an historic monument being in support of military effort suggests that militarisation has both a broader and narrower meaning than weaponisation – broader in that this repurposing goes beyond causing harm, and narrower in that it is carried out by a specific actor, namely the military. While not explicitly defining the concept of militarisation, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property and its related Protocols regulate the use of cultural property for military purposes during armed conflict.

Politicisation follows a similar logic but occurs in the broader realm of politics, describing the process by which issues once seen as neutral become subjects of political debate (Zürn, 2014; 2019). The proceedings of the World Heritage Committee exemplify this dynamic in the cultural heritage sphere. Often centring on questions of sovereignty, they illustrate how cultural symbols become political battlegrounds (Langendonk & Drieskens, 2024).

Continuing this line of reasoning for **securitisation** seems justified as a growing body of research explores heritage destruction as security concern by drawing on this concept. However, rooted in the Copenhagen School of international relations, the concept refers to the process whereby discourse is used to construct an issue as an existential threat that justifies extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998; Langendonk & Drieskens, 2025). Framing destruction as cultural genocide is one way to securitise it in the context of heritage, but applying this framing in global settings such as the UN General Assembly is challenging given that securitisation only succeeds when the audience accepts that survival is at risk. Convincing the international community of this risk requires little effort when threats have an immediate global impact. This applies to food (security) and energy (security), which are both essential for biological survival and highly globalised.

By contrast, cultural attribution and destruction seldom produce global ripple effects (Drieskens & Verpoest, 2026). Citizens around the world do not typically perceive these threats as directly relevant to their immediate survival. They are often seen as non-existential and localised phenomena, making their securitisation in global settings difficult. The Ukrainian discourse in the General Debate of the UN General Assembly seems to confirm this: it recognises the broad scale of weaponisation but emphasises issues as food (security) and energy (security) instead of cultural heritage, presenting them as weapons with global reach. The observation that securitisation, and thus the strategic use of discourse, can make weaponisation more effective not only supports the choice to distinguish between these concepts but also motivates the strategic narrative analysis that follows.

2. A Strategic Narrative Analysis of Russian and Ukrainian discourse on cultural heritage

2.1 Methodological considerations

Strategic Narrative Analysis (SNA) entails the analysis of the "means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future to shape understandings of international order to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors." (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 6). As such, it offers policymakers a systematic method to understand how actors construct and communicate narratives to influence behaviour domestically and internationally. This paper distinguishes three types of narratives for analysing how heritage is mobilised to shape interpretations of the ongoing conflict by both Russia and Ukraine: **system narratives**, which establish the broader picture

of how the international order is understood; **identity narratives**, which position actors and define their national roles; and **issue narratives,** which focus on specific events, actions and policies. These narratives should be seen as interrelated, even when they differ: the issue level concretises the identity level, which in turn is a concretisation of the system level.

Following this reasoning, cultural heritage becomes a weapon when it is **embedded** in narratives about the international system that actors adopt (system level), in narratives about the roles and identities they construct (identity level), or in their narratives about concrete events and conflicts (issue level). As elaborated below, on the system level, Russia and Ukraine situate cultural heritage within *broader claims about international order*. Russian narratives often frame heritage as part of a civilisational sphere, portraying Ukraine's cultural policies as violations of a shared historical order and Russia's actions as safeguarding this heritage. Ukrainian narratives, by contrast, tend to present these attacks as assaults on the rule-based international order, aligning heritage with sovereign statehood as well as international law and norms. Moreover, on the identity level, Russia and Ukraine use cultural heritage to define their *cultural identity*. Russia frequently invokes the orthodox character of heritage and historical continuity to assert cultural unity and historical entitlement. Ukraine counters this by reasserting distinct national heritage, emphasising processes of decolonisation, while also paying attention to ethnic diversity. Finally, on the issue level, Russia and Ukraine instrumentalise cultural heritage in *concrete disputes and events*. Examples include Russia's targeted destruction of the Prymachenko Museum and looting of museums in Kherson (cf. below), as well as Ukraine's removal of Soviet monuments and renaming of cities and streets following the decommunisation and decolonisation laws of 2015 and 2023. In fact, it is at this level that cultural heritage is most strategically deployed, whether to legitimise military action or to mobilise other types of international support.

Many of these narratives are not immediately visible and therefore require critical analysis across a wide range of sources. Material was collected from official institutional sources and major media outlets in both countries. For the Russian side, official sources consulted included policy documents and official communications from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (*Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii*) and the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation (*Administratsiya Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii*).[1] An important additional source was the coverage and commentary published on the Russki Mir website (Russian-language version). These sources were complemented by a systematic review of articles in major government-led newspapers such as Parlamentskaya Gazeta and Gazeta.ru. Ukrainian narratives were analysed using statements from the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine (*Ministerstvo kultury Ukrainy*), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (*Ministerstvo zakordonnykh sprav Ukrainy*), and the Office of the President of Ukraine (*Ofis Prezydenta Ukrainy*), together with key governmental and civil society media sources such as Ukrinform, Suspilne, ZMINA, Rayon.in.ua, Pragmatika Media.[2]

2.2 Macro-level analysis

The analysis reveals that neither Russia nor Ukraine advances a single cultural heritage narrative. Instead, and suggesting that weaponisation is a complex reality, **multiple narratives can be identified at all three levels specified above**. More specifically, the sources reveal **a multi-layered discourse on both sides of the conflict**, in which **different narratives coexist on different levels**. The following table provides an overview of these narratives, organised by levels of occurrence. The dominant narratives informing the meso-analysis are highlighted in bold, whereas those informing the micro-analysis are indicated in italics.

1 Official websites: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation: https://mid.ru; Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation: http://kremlin.ru

2 Official websites: Ministry of Culture of Ukraine: https://mcip.gov.ua; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine: https://mfa.gov.ua; Office of the President of Ukraine: https://www.president.gov.ua

	Russian narratives	Ukrainian narratives
System level	**Cultural heritage narratives are rooted in Russia's civilisational discourse, portraying Russia as a victim and Ukraine as a puppet of the West** Cultural heritage as a tool for (re)writing history Cultural heritage claims as cultural appropriation	**Russia's weaponisation of cultural heritage as both local and global threat** Cultural heritage as a tool for strategic cultural diplomacy Cultural heritage as a framework encouraging global engagement
Identity level	**Cultural heritage as an integral part of Russki Mir** Cultural heritage claims as erasure of Ukrainian state and nationhood *Russia as protector of cultural heritage*	**Cultural heritage as an essential dimension of national security** Cultural heritage destruction by Russia as historical erasure *Cultural heritage professionals as defenders of Ukrainian identity*
Issue level	**Cultural heritage destruction as destruction of common roots (Ukrainisation)** Cultural heritage destruction as persecution of Russian language and culture (Russophobia) *Cultural heritage destruction as site of blame shifting*	**Cultural heritage as an opportunity for decolonisation** *Cultural heritage appropriation as Russification* Cultural heritage destruction as Ukrainophobia Cultural heritage policy as indicator of cultural governance weaknesses

Table 1 Macro-level analysis

The mapping of heritage narratives in government and media sources indicates that neither Russia nor Ukraine advances a single cultural heritage narrative. Instead, and suggesting that weaponisation is a complex reality, **multiple narratives can be identified at all three levels specified above**.

For **Russia,** the system narrative has two important focal points: the West as an aggressor and the importance of history. Within its policies, Russia clearly understands the power of historical narratives and actively instrumentalises history for political purposes. As Vladimir Putin's advisor Vladimir Medinsky put it, "Whoever controls history controls the future. History determines the actions of people today." (Shultz & Jasparro, 2022, p.3). This focus on history is also linked with how Russia defines its identity in its narrative strategies. Russia constructs a collective identity where Ukrainian nationhood is replaced with the idea of a "Russian world", justifying war and territorial claims. It either incorporates Ukraine into the "Russian world" or depicts it as a mere instrument of Western influence. Sergey Lavrov for example stated that "the Russians who now live in the liberated territories firmly confirm their commitment to the Russian world in all its meanings. Their loyalty to Russia, from which they were separated at one time for various reasons, has never been perceived by them as being detached from Russia" (Lavrov, 2024). In doing so, Russia seems to deny Ukraine's status as an autonomous subject and actor in the political, historical, and cultural fields.

Interestingly, Russia uses a different narrative strategy on the issue level. Although the Russian world is the core concept of Russian identity, when it comes to specific issues of cultural heritage, Russia mainly stresses that Ukraine is the aggressor, **destroying common historical roots** with Russia and actively persecuting Russian language and culture. A good example of this is the Russki Mir news section, where articles accusing Ukraine of a policy of 'ukrainisation' (*ukrainizatsiya*) towards the Russian-speaking population are widespread, being mentioned in more than 300 articles since 2008. Since the international outcry against the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has accused the West and

of "rampant Russophobia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025). This resulted in a global campaign, which also shows on the Russki Mir news section, where more than 500 articles on **'russophobia'** (*rusofobiya*) were published in a one-year timespan (between November 2024 and November 2025). Concerning cultural heritage, Russia applies a **blame-shifting narrative**, countering Ukrainian and international accusations of heritage destruction with Russian media articles that report that military actions by the Armed Forces of Ukraine have damaged cultural heritage sites in Russia (the Kursk region). These messages are aimed primarily at a domestic Russian audience, with claims that "Ukrainian forces are targeting not only the destruction of civilians but also the annihilation of historical and spiritual memory" (Pochtaruk, 2024).

On the **Ukrainian** side, the massive destruction of the country's cultural heritage also implies that the country's strategic narratives are more focused on cultural heritage than before. On the system level, Ukraine highlights the **weaponisation of heritage by Russia**, stating that cultural destruction is a tool of hybrid war, threatening not only Ukraine but global security. Ukraine has become somewhat of a pioneer in emergency measures for safeguarding cultural heritage and international advocacy. In doing so, it has paved the way for more strategic approaches to cultural and heritage diplomacy. The **defence of heritage is a shared global responsibility**, with the Ukrainian Centre for Defence Strategies stating that "Ukraine's international partners... should seriously consider the role of cultural heritage... and develop layered pre-emptive and reactive policies." (Busol & Frolova, 2021, p. 5). Ukraine thus sees cultural diplomacy as a strategic response to the weaponisation of heritage and identity preservation. On the identity level, Ukraine perceives **Russian attacks on cultural heritage as an attempt to erase Ukraine's cultural identity**. The Ukrainian Strategy for Culture 2025-2030 states that "The Russian Federation grossly, systematically and on a large scale violates the norms of international humanitarian law regarding cultural values. The policy of the Russian Federation regarding the cultural heritage of Ukraine and the Ukrainian national identity is aimed at cultural erasure, cultural appropriation, and cultural genocide (Strategy for Culture, 2025). Ukrainian researchers have further studied the total destruction of the cultural heritage of Ukrainian cities ('urbicide') as an "attempt to erase history" (Buchko & Stetsiuk, 2023, p. 21). As a consequence, the most important identity narrative for Ukraine is that **culture and heritage is being reframed from a soft power to a strategic part of national security,** especially in the newly approved Strategy for Culture, which calls for the "integration of culture and cultural heritage into the national security system as its integral elements." (Strategy for Culture, 2025). These statements echo earlier research by the Ukrainian Centre for Defence Strategies that "Ukraine has increasingly realised that cultural heritage is an inherent element of national security... crucial for preventing external aggression and for countering it." (Busol & Frolova 2021, p. 4). Damage to cultural heritage is damage to sovereignty and identity. In the same vein, **heritage professionals are depicted as defenders of Ukrainian identity**.

On the issue level, Ukraine has forged a narrative of **decommunisation** after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas in 2014 by passing the 2015 decommunisation laws. As the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia unfolded, **decolonisation** emerged as a new layer of Ukraine's heritage policy. Ukraine passed a new law *On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and the Decolonisation of Toponymy* on 21 March 2023. This law sets out the legal foundations for condemning Russian imperial policy and prohibits the promotion of its symbols. Two other major issue narratives include the **appropriation of Ukrainian heritage as a form of Russification and the destruction of cultural heritage as an expression of Ukrainophobia**. Interestingly, the 2023 decolonisation law offers a definition of both terms: Ukrainophobia is described as "discriminatory actions, publicly expressed appeals, including in the media, in literary and artistic works, that deny the subjectivity of the

Ukrainian state, the Ukrainian nation" (Zakon Verkhovna Rada, 2023).[3] Russification is defined as "a component of Russian imperial policy aimed at imposing the use of the Russian language, promoting Russian culture as superior to other national languages and cultures, displacing the Ukrainian language from use, and narrowing the Ukrainian cultural and information space" (Zakon Verkhovna Rada, 2023). A last issue narrative is more introspective and highlights **Ukraine's weakness in cultural governance**. Until 2022, Ukraine's cultural heritage was marginalized and chronically underfunded, with no state strategies for its capitalisation, and still "no systematic mechanism for assessing cultural losses, no specific procedures for documenting destroyed sites, no legal mechanism for returning illegally moved collections." (Strategy for Culture, 2025)

2.3 Meso-level analysis

The previous section has shown that Russian and Ukrainian discourses on cultural heritage are layered and diverse. While they may appear to put forward distinct sets of narratives, a closer examination reveals an action-reaction logic, in which narratives not only interact but also evolve. In fact, by reinforcing one another unintentionally, narratives seem to gain dominance over time. For the meso-level of analysis, we focus on how dominant narratives interact for all three levels.

	Russian narratives	Ukrainian narratives
System level	**Cultural heritage narratives are rooted in Russia's civilisation discourse, portraying Russia as a victim and, more recently, Ukraine as a puppet of the West** "...They have realised that their goal is to prevent Russia from becoming stronger, to contain our country, and they are seriously discussing how to 'decolonise' Russia. For them, this is a strategic objective" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024)	**Russia's weaponisation of cultural heritage as both local and global threat** "The policy of the Russian Federation ... is aimed at cultural erasure, cultural appropriation, cultural genocide" (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025).
Identity level	**Cultural heritage as an integral part of Russki Mir** "there are... attempts to abolish or isolate Russian culture, which impoverish the global cultural palette and deprive peoples of the opportunity to understand and appreciate the great heritage that contributes to spiritual enrichment" (Russki Mir Foundation, 2025).	**Cultural heritage as an essential dimension of national security** "...culture and cultural heritage as integral elements of the national security system" (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025).
Issue level	**Cultural heritage destruction as destruction of common roots (Ukrainisation)** "We have repeatedly stated that almost all monuments of the Soviet era have been demolished in the country, including monuments to V. I. Lenin, to whom Ukraine owes its statehood..." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022)	**Cultural heritage as an opportunity for decolonisation** "The renaming of districts in cities, squares, boulevards ... and other objects of toponymy of settlements, the names of which contain symbols of Russian imperial policy, such renaming is carried out by order of the head of the relevant regional state administration..." (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2023)

Table 2 Meso-level analysis

3 Full quote; "Ukrainophobia – discriminatory actions, publicly expressed appeals, including in the media, in literary and artistic works, that deny the subjectivity of the Ukrainian state, the Ukrainian nation, the fight against the subjugation, exploitation, assimilation of the Ukrainian people, as well as the legitimacy of protecting the political, economic, and cultural rights of the Ukrainian people, the development of Ukrainian national statehood, science, and culture, disparage the specific ethnocultural characteristics of Ukrainians, and ignore the Ukrainian language and culture" see Law of Ukraine 'On the condemnation and prohibition of the propaganda of Russian imperial policy in Ukraine and the decolonisation of toponymy', 21 March 2023.

On the **systemic level,** Russia's weaponisation of cultural heritage is part of a **wider civilisational narrative** in which **Russia presents the West as the primary aggressor and Russia as a victim** of the West's strategic objective to "prevent Russia from becoming stronger, to contain our country" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024). Russia positions itself as a state reacting defensively to Western attempts to expand its influence in Eastern Europe. Since 2014, Ukraine has been portrayed in Russian discourse as having become de facto a puppet of the West. In this narrative, Ukraine's sovereignty is denied, and responsibility for the invasion is shifted away from Russia toward the West. Ukraine has reacted to these narratives by consistently stressing the **weaponisation of cultural heritage and culture**. This is framed by Ukraine as a **threat not only to Ukraine, but to global security**, thereby countering Russia's anti-Western narrative with a global narrative on norms and security. Russia's actions are perceived as undermining international norms and conventions, thereby constituting a global security concern.

At the **identity level,** the heart of the Russian narrative is the concept of ***Russki Mir* (the Russian World).** This concept is underpinned by the Russki Mir foundation supported by the Russian Ministry of education, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Russki Mir soft power strategy promoted by the Russian state, particularly under Vladimir Putin, functions both as a cultural, religious and political ideology. It supports the expansion of Russian language and culture through cultural centres abroad. As Miskimmon and colleagues state, "the narrative of the Russian World is in large part the narrative of a nation-state" which focuses on "the identity of the community" and "mobilises rhetorics of culture, language, and religion and uses them to bind its targets to the foreign policy objectives of the state (which can act as a protector of its diaspora). The mobilisation of nationalism acts to legitimate the regime within Russia" (Miskimmon et al., p. 178). By promoting this narrative, the Russian World is claimed as the true historical statehood of Ukraine, denying Ukraine's own identity path. As this is a narrative that has been long in the making, it is particularly difficult for Ukraine to counter, especially because it permeates politics, culture, religion, language policies and heritage. Concerning the latter, Ukraine has countered this narrative by strongly linking cultural heritage to its national identity and, furthermore, **framing it as an element of national security.** Culture is recognised as a strategic part of national security in Ukraine, where damage to cultural heritage is damage to its identity. It is also fixed at the state level and formulated in the newly updated Ukrainian Strategy for Culture.

How this also translates into a rejection of many Russki Mir-related policies can be seen at the level of **issue narratives. A key example is toponymic decolonisation,** implemented after the 2015 decommunisation laws and 2023 decolonisation laws. In the specific situation of Ukraine as a country that has been targeted by disinformation and propaganda for over a decade, the reaction to narratives is conditioned by events (Miskimmon et al., p. 179). The decommunisation laws were a reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas in 2014, the decolonisation laws were a reaction to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The often symbolic destruction of Ukrainian heritage by Russian troops, for example statues of Ukraine's national poet Taras Shevchenko being shot through the head by invading Russian forces in 2022, was answered with the removal of Soviet and Russian monuments all over Ukraine.[4] Likewise, Soviet names of streets and cities were altered. This in its turn sparked a Russian counter-narrative: with Russia **framing Ukraine's decommunisation and decolonisation policies as the destruction of "shared roots."** Ukrainian domestic reforms were presented by Russian state media as an attack on common cultural heritage. Russian culture, Orthodoxy, imperial figures, and Soviet memory are framed as belonging equally to both nations, erasing Ukraine's own historical trajectory.

4 For more information on Shevchenko as a target and other destroyed monuments and sites, see the Ukrainian Institute's Postcards from Ukraine website, which show before and after pictures of the sites, e.g. https://ui.org.ua/en/postcard/bust-of-taras-shevchenko/

© Kherson Regional Art Museum, Oleksandr Kornyakov

To conclude, this analysis demonstrates how Ukrainian and Russian narratives **interact and compete**. Most of the Russian narratives have elicited a Ukrainian counternarrative or have led Ukraine to redefine its views on shared and contested heritage, as the country's decommunisation and decolonisation laws demonstrate. When looking at this 'battle of narratives' based on institutional and media sources, it may seem that Ukraine's heritage narratives are predominantly reactive, used to counter Russian disinformation. However, since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the massive destruction of Ukraine's heritage has led Ukrainian heritage communities to develop a more proactive heritage, linking it to the country's identity. Thus, strategic narratives on Ukrainian heritage have refocused on stressing Ukrainian cultural diversity and resilience, with a strong determination to further counter Russian narratives that legitimise looting and cultural appropriation. The following section gives an **example** of these competing narratives, by discussing a case study of Russian looting of two museums in the city of Kherson.

2.4 Micro-level Analysis

The looting of the **Kherson Regional Art Museum** and the **Kherson Museum of Local Lore** in the south of Ukraine in 2022 illustrates how cultural heritage was deliberately instrumentalised and weaponised by Russia. It is a unique case to study the weaponisation of cultural heritage, because the city was occupied and liberated in 2022, which made a specific study and reconstruction of how Ukraine's heritage was affected possible. Indeed, in many other regions still under occupation, it is near to impossible to verify which artefacts have been taken from museums, and where they have ended up.

The Kherson Regional Art Museum is housed in Kherson's former city-hall building, dating from 1905, designed by architect Adolf Minkus. As PEN America reports, its collection held more than 10,000 pieces of art (PEN America, 2023), including 17th-to early-20th-century icon painting and religious works, Ukrainian art of the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. According to the state Kherson library records, "the collection of the museum comprised approximately 173,000 items, the museum collection includes unique archaeological

© Kherson Museum of Local Lore

artefacts, weaponry, ethnographic materials, and objects reflecting the region's multicultural history (Kherson Regional Universal Scientific Library n.d.). The museum also held works by notable artists such as Ivan Aivazovsky and Mariia Prymachenko.

Prior to occupation in 2022 the collection of the Kherson Museum of Local Lore, as fixed in their records, numbered 180,000 items, including one of Ukraine's finest archaeological and weaponry collections, and exquisite porcelain and antique furniture. It holds artefacts of regional history, from Scythian gold and Greek marble sculptures to Cossack arms, early plans of the Kherson fortress, and ethnographic materials reflecting the area's multicultural heritage (Kherson Regional Art Museum n.d.).

Russian forces captured Kherson in March 2022 and took control of the city's museums by July. Between late October and early November 2022, Ukrainian troops were approaching the Russian-occupied city. Knowing that a Ukrainian de-occupation operation was afoot, Russian security services and art experts looted both museums' collections. As reported by the state and according to a special investigation by the Kyiv Independent, **approximately 10,000 items from the Kherson Regional Art Museum were removed by Russian-occupying forces and 23,000 items were reportedly stolen from the Kherson Local Lore Museum,** along with its entire collection records (The Kyiv Independent, 2022). The operation involved Russian art specialists, FSB personnel, and civilian-clothed accomplices. The satellite imagery from November 1, provided by the Smithsonian, revealed large trucks parked at the side of the Kherson Regional Art museum (Kurin, 2023). The collections were loaded onto trucks and transported to occupied Crimea, primarily to the Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol.

The Kherson looting provides a clear case through which strategic communication from both sides can be analysed. The analysis is based on qualitative data from focus group discussions, where the following sources were used: a review of official Ukrainian, Russian and international statements, media reporting, and investigative reports. Based on these sources, **the analysis revealed that multiple narratives are simultaneously in place.** The following narratives were identified:

The Russian narrative emphasised legality, presenting Russia as a true protector of cultural heritage. Evacuation and temporary transfer of Ukrainian collections are framed as

a "natural step," and a necessary measure to safeguard heritage. Preservation is linked to ensuring safety of the collection, while denying Ukrainian statehood and practices of cultural appropriation – key Russian identity narratives. For example, one of the key figures involved in transferring the looted collections to the Simferopol museum was its director Andrey Malgin. As he stated in an interview with *The Moscow Times*: "Due to the introduction of martial law in the territory of the Kherson region, I was instructed to remove the exhibits of the Kherson Art Museum for temporary storage and ensure their preservation until they are returned to their lawful owner." (Pragmatika Media, 2023).

At the same time, there is a clear **narrative silence** in Russian reporting on the Kherson museums in 2022. Whereas a lot is written about "saving" the artefacts from the Kherson museums, there is near to no mention of the military context, i.e. the Ukrainian forces liberating Kherson. It is very clear also that the location and conditions of temporary storage also remain unexplained with press articles revealing only snippets of information on parts of the collection. For example, as Larysa Zharkykh from the Kherson Regional Art Museum, explained, in the photos accompanying the (Russian) news, you can see works from the Kherson Art Museum but they said it was from the Museum of Local Lore, highlighting confusion and misrepresentation in public reporting (Suspilne Kherson, 2023). Another Russian article mentions that the museum of Taurida in Simferopol would host a part of the collection, but remains silent on which artefacts exactly, and fails to address the destiny of the other looted artefacts (TASS, 2025). This silence functions as a broader tactic to obscure accountability concerning the looting of cultural heritage.

The Ukrainian narrative in the Kherson case stresses time and again that looting of museum artefacts is a violation of international law, positioning Ukraine as the lawful owner and framing Russia claims that they removed the artefacts to save cultural heritage as a false pretext. Museum workers from Kherson who testified afterwards stressed that the Russians who removed the objects did not pay attention to the right conditions and care while removing the objects, and claims have been voiced that at least one of them was caught stealing some of the objects during the 'safekeeping' operation. Even more, as Larysa Zharkykh noted, "we suspect that not the entire collection was transported to Crimea, and that part of it may have 'dispersed' along the way and ended up in private collections. At the very least, we can already state that clearly more than 10,000 works of art have been stolen." (Suspilne Kherson, 2023).

The museum workers continued to take care of what survived. Deputy Head of Kherson Regional Art Museum Ihor Rusol mentioned that "...we are currently creating some conditions to preserve what remains.....We are coming to our senses – taking stock, reviewing what we still have and what is already gone..." (Suspilne Kherson, 2023). For **heritage professionals**, these collections were the **material embodiment of their identity that needed to be defended**. The experience of 66-year-old Kherson Regional Art Museum librarian Halyna Aksiutina highlights this narrative. In her interview she remembered that the occupiers barred museum staff from working. On her final visit, she found a rare 1894 edition of "Kobzar" by Taras Shevchenko and understood she had to rescue at least this one book. "I felt very sorry for this book. I thought it would be the first thing they would destroy, because it has symbolic significance. And they destroy everything Ukrainian.." (Komtishev, 2023).

It is also worth noting that the Russian decision to move the artefacts to Crimea is framed as **russification** and sees the Russian reporting on the "evacuation" as proof that Russia systematically violates international humanitarian and cultural heritage law. This narrative was further supported by international organisations and their reports. For example, as Human Rights Watch stated, "this systematic looting was an organised operation to rob Ukrainians of their national heritage and amounts to a war crime for which the pillagers should be held to account." (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Here also, both sides reinforce their narratives by countering the opponent's narrative. Four years after the looting of the Kherson museums, these narratives linger and are still being put forward in the media. On 15 April 2026, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) charged Simferopol museum director Malgin *in absentia* with war crimes committed by a group of individuals in a prior conspiracy with the looting of the artefacts from the Kherson Oblast as the basis for the charges and announced the intention to place his name on the international wanted list. One day later, Malgin rejected the accusations, saying that "the exhibits were evacuated from Kherson at the request of local authorities", and that "this was done solely to preserve cultural heritage. The evacuation of the objects was carried out in accordance with the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. 'According to this convention, any party to a military operation in which cultural property is located is obligated to make efforts to save it and avoid damaging it. This is precisely what was done,' the museum director explained" (TASS, 2026). Thus, the **Ukrainian narrative of Russia as a violator of international heritage law** is countered with **a Russian narrative of Russia being the true protector on cultural heritage**.

Last but not least, there is a clear difference between Russian and Ukrainian **narrative construction**: whereas Ukraine mentions details of the collection, and time and again stresses its extensive historical value, the Russian narrative is much more selective in discussing the case, focusing on the successful removal to Simferopol and remaining silent about the content of the collection itself.

The looting of the Kherson museums illustrates how **cultural heritage becomes a strategic communicative battleground during armed conflict.** The analysis demonstrates that Russian and Ukrainian actors advanced fundamentally opposed narratives, each serving distinct political and normative objectives. The Russian narrative consistently framed the removal of museum artefacts as a lawful evacuation, positioning Russia as a protector of cultural heritage. This narrative is reinforced through strategic silence: Russian reporting largely omits the military context of Ukraine's liberation of Kherson and provides only fragmentary information about the artefacts' whereabouts, their conditions of storage, and the fate of large parts of the collection.

	Russian narratives	Ukrainian narratives
Identity level	*Russia as true protector of cultural heritage* Simferopol museum director Andrey Malgin: "... Due to the introduction of martial law in the territory of the Kherson region, I was instructed to remove the exhibits of the Kherson Art Museum for temporary storage and ensure their preservation until they are returned to their lawful owner." (Pragmatika Media, 2023).	*Heritage professionals as defenders of Ukrainian identity* Deputy Head of Kherson Regional Art Museum Ihor Rusol "...we are currently creating some conditions to preserve what remains....We are coming to our senses – taking stock, reviewing what we still have and what is already gone..." (Suspilne Kherson, 2023)
Issue level	*Cultural heritage destruction as a site of blame shifting* "...And although Russia is accused of theft.. the exhibits will definitely return to their native walls. But for now, they are safer in Crimea..." (Crimea radio, 2022).	*Cultural heritage appropriation as Russification* "As the representative of the Security Service of Ukraine mentioned, the crime committed by the Russians has two components. The first is the theft of items through which Ukrainians identified themselves and felt a connection with those who lived on Ukrainian lands before them. The second component is outright looting...." (Mamonova et al., 2022).

Table 3 Micro-level analysis

In contrast, the Ukrainian narrative persistently frames the events as unlawful looting and a violation of international law. Ukrainian actors emphasise detailed descriptions of the collections, testimonies from museum staff, and evidence of improper handling and individual theft to reinforce legal ownership and moral authority. Stolen artefacts from the collections of both museums are also documented on the official governmental website dedicated to stolen cultural property and war crimes *WAR Sanctions*.[5] The transfer of artefacts to Crimea is perceived as a tactic of russification and colonial appropriation. The Kherson museum case shows how **narrative construction through both framing and strategic omissions** plays a decisive role in shaping interpretations of responsibility in conflicts over cultural heritage.

3. Findings and recommendations

This report examined the weaponisation of heritage in Ukraine, more in specific **what** narratives are being advanced in relation to cultural heritage in the context of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine and **how** these narratives are constructed and deployed. Taken together, the findings support three complementary conclusions addressing these questions:

Narrative multiplicity: Neither Russia nor Ukraine promotes a singular cultural heritage narrative in the current conflict. Rather, multiple narratives operate simultaneously at different levels.

Narrative interaction: There is an action–reaction dynamic between Russian and Ukrainian narratives, in which narratives interact and evolve over time. In some cases, narratives unintentionally reinforce one another, contributing to their increasing dominance.

Narrative expression: Both speech and silence play a crucial role in narrative construction. What is articulated matters, but so too does what remains unsaid.

Based on these conclusions, we propose ten **policy recommendations** and eight targeted actions:

Policy Recommendations

1. Recognise cultural heritage and narratives as core hybrid threat domains
The Ministry of Defence, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education, Culture and Science should formally recognise cultural heritage and historical narratives as central components of hybrid warfare. The Russia – Ukraine case shows that heritage sites, museums, and historical interpretations are deliberately used to legitimise territorial claims, deny Ukrainian sovereignty, and undermine international law. These domains should therefore not be treated as peripheral. **Embedding cultural heritage and strategic narrative analysis within security thinking** will enable earlier detection of hybrid tactics in order to improve policy coherence and respond proportionally and credibly to similar actions.

2. Institutionalise multi-level strategic narrative analysis in Russia – Ukraine policy
Dutch policy should systematically incorporate multi-level narrative analysis that distinguishes between system level, identity level, and issue level narratives. The research demonstrates that Russian and Ukrainian positions on heritage protection are shaped not only by concrete events but by **competing interpretations** of sovereignty and historical continuity, and **opposing interpretations** of legality. Institutionalising this approach across defence, diplomatic, and cultural policy processes will improve strategic understanding and enable more precise alignment between military, legal, and diplomatic responses.

5 Main Directorate of Intelligence of Ukraine, Stolen Cultural Property Database https://war-sanctions.gur.gov.ua/en/stolen/objects

3. Integrate narrative intelligence into strategic planning

Narrative intelligence should be treated as a standard input in Dutch strategic planning related to Russia and Ukraine. The main reason for this is that the way actions such as "protection," "evacuation," or "liberation" are framed directly affects international response options and legal accountability. The research shows that Russia's selective communication and silences around cultural heritage actions are conscious strategic choices. Integrating **narrative intelligence** alongside **military and political assessments** will allow Dutch institutions to counter disinformation more effectively and align operational decisions with long term strategic objectives.

4. Anticipate interactive narrative escalation dynamics

Dutch policy should try to take into account the interactive and reactive nature of Russian and Ukrainian narratives. The research highlights how Ukrainian decommunisation policies and Russia's "shared heritage" discourse mutually **shape escalation dynamics**. Although not easy, anticipating these reactions is essential for avoiding unintended reinforcement of Russian claims. A shared understanding of narrative patterns of action and reaction across defence, diplomacy and culture domains can improve policy planning and support anticipatory engagement.

5. Treat narrative silence and ambiguity as strategic indicators

The absence of clear information such as Russian ambiguity regarding the condition or location of relocated Ukrainian artefacts should be treated as a **meaningful strategic signal**. The research shows that silence and vagueness are not accidental but can be used to delay accountability. Dutch institutions should therefore integrate the analysis of narrative gaps into early warning and risk assessment frameworks. Doing so enhances situational awareness and can prevent delayed implementation of policies caused by waiting for complete information that may never materialise.

6. Embed cultural heritage expertise within security governance

Cultural heritage expertise should be structurally embedded within Dutch security governance. The research demonstrates that **heritage specialists** can make a solid contribution to **understanding** identity based **claims** and historical **manipulation** in hybrid conflict. Moreover, they can also help to explain the **symbolism** of certain monuments, museums and artefacts being targeted. Including such expertise within defence planning and strategic advisory bodies can help institutions in Dutch security governance to interpret events more accurately.

7. Strengthen accountability for cultural heritage violations

The research shows that Russia's framing seeks to normalise or obscure heritage appropriation under narratives of protection or continuity. Sustained legal and diplomatic pressure counters this strategy by reinforcing international norms and deterring future violations. Aligning defence, diplomatic, and cultural efforts around **accountability mechanisms** supports Ukraine's legal claims but also contributes to long term deterrence beyond the immediate conflict setting.

8. Ensure narrative coherence across multilateral and emergency heritage frameworks

Dutch positions on cultural heritage in the Russia–Ukraine context should be narratively coherent across UNESCO, ICOM, ALIPH, Cultural Emergency Response (CER), and relevant EU institutions. The research shows that Russia exploits fragmentation between normative, funding, emergency response, and security frameworks. Aligning Dutch diplomatic, cultural, and security narratives across these bodies particularly on legality, sovereignty, and the distinction between protection and appropriation limits narrative fragmentation. Internal coordination among the Dutch Army, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is essential to maintain coherence across mandates and in different crisis phases.

9. Systematically learn from Ukraine's frontline experience

Ukraine functions as a frontline laboratory for heritage protection under conditions of occupation and war. The Kherson case study provides concrete insights into emergency responses and documentation strategies developed under extreme pressure. Based on this research, it is advisable that Dutch policy should move from ad hoc learning toward systematic incorporation of these lessons. Treating Ukrainian experience as strategic knowledge enhances preparedness for future hybrid threats. This will also improve the Netherlands' contribution to EU resilience (see recommendation 10).

10. Shift from reactive support to long term narrative resilience

Dutch support for Ukraine should evolve from reactive crisis responses toward sustained investment in narrative resilience. Our research has shown that battles over history, identity, and legitimacy continue beyond immediate military phases. Long term engagement with cultural institutions, documentation efforts, and narrative counterstrategies is therefore essential. This can be done most effectively by embedding this perspective within joint defence, diplomatic, and cultural policy (see targeted action 2, 3 and 4).

Targeted Actions

1. Establish a joint Narratives and Heritage Task Force

Create a permanent interministerial task force bringing together the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to monitor and analyse Russian and Ukrainian narratives related to heritage and identity during the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The task force should synthesise counter hybrid intelligence, cultural expertise, and diplomatic reporting into shared assessments. Such a coordinated Task Force could improve early warning and avoid fragmented communication.

2. Integrate narrative assessments into intelligence reporting

Mandate the inclusion of narrative assessments in routine intelligence and policy briefings on Russia and Ukraine. Such narrative assessments should include framing strategies, symbolic actions, and silences related to cultural heritage and history. This can be operationalised by drawing directly on the research's analytical framework. This practice can improve strategic interpretation and lead to more coherent responses across military, diplomatic, and cultural domains.

3. Provide strategic narrative analysis training for staff

Introduce targeted training modules for military officers, diplomats, and policymakers on strategic narratives, heritage weaponisation, and identity based hybrid threats. This can be operationalised by using Ukraine based case studies from the research. This type of training should focus on recognising narrative manipulation, identifying escalation risks, and which legal framing strategies are being used. Developing this common strategic narrative literacy can greatly enhance a shared understanding that facilitates cross institutional communication. This type of trainings support the development of a sustainable analytical capacity rather than ad hoc reliance on external expertise.

4. Include cultural heritage experts in crisis exercises

Embed cultural heritage and narrative experts in defence and diplomatic crisis simulations, tabletop exercises, and emergency analyses. Using scenarios inspired by cases such as that of the Kherson museums, exercises should examine how heritage actions influence legitimacy, escalation, and post-conflict accountability. This strengthens medium- and long-term thinking and highlights secondary effects often neglected in security planning. This approach ensures that cultural dimensions are immediately integrated into operational exercises, rather than being addressed only after policy decisions are made.

5. Support Ukrainian heritage documentation infrastructures

The research shows that documentation is central to countering Russian narratives of protection and ensuring future accountability. Coordinated and sustained Dutch involvement for Ukrainian initiatives documenting damaged, stolen, and relocated cultural heritage are therefore crucial. This includes databases, digital archiving, and forensic methodologies. This action will demonstrate Dutch support to international legal processes and demonstrates long term commitment to heritage monitoring as processes of accountability.

6. Coordinate Dutch communication strategies across UNESCO, ICOM, ALIPH, CER, and EU

Establish a coordination mechanism to ensure Dutch communication across UNESCO, ICOM, ALIPH, Cultural Emergency Response (CER), and EU cultural institutions about how Russia frames its actions in Ukraine. In line with targeted action 1, the coordination can be taken up by the proposed Joint Narratives and Heritage taskforce. Based on the research, the communication should focus on topics like heritage removal, destruction, and relocation as violations of sovereignty and international law. A coordinated Dutch communication strategy on these topics can improve inter-institutional alignment before funding decisions and emergency interventions.

7. Systematically collect and analyse Ukrainian best practices

Complementary to targeted action 6, it would also be advisable to launch a structured programme to collect and analyse Ukrainian best practices in heritage protection in situations of armed conflict. Based on the research's empirical insights, this programme should include museum management during occupation, documentation under resource scarcity, and counter disinformation strategies. This strengthens Dutch preparedness and contributes to broader European and NATO resilience against similar hybrid tactics.

8. Integrate heritage resilience into regional security dialogues

Last but not least, heritage and narrative resilience should be explicitly incorporated into Dutch security cooperation with Baltic states and Poland. These countries share exposure to similar Russian historical and identity based narratives. The insights from the Ukraine case can contribute to joint discussions and should address early warning strategies, documentation tools and counter framing narratives. Although it might seem of secondary importance, integrating cultural considerations into regional defence dialogue with the Baltic states and Poland can truly strengthen collective resilience. Moreover, a nuanced strategic narrative analysis focusing on the weaponisation of heritage in those regions too can significantly increase hybrid threat awareness.

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Annex 1. Ukraine's address to the General Debate of the UN General Assembly September 2023

Retrieved from: https://gadebate.un.org/en/78/ukraine

Thank you very much!
I welcome all who stand for common efforts!
And I promise – being really united we can guarantee fair peace for all nations. What's more, unity can prevent wars.

Ladies and gentlemen!
Mr. Secretary General!
Fellow leaders!

This hall saw many wars but not as an active defender against the aggressions.

In many cases, the fear of war, the final war, was the loudest here – the war after which no one would gather in the General Assembly Hall again.
The Third World War was seen as a nuclear war. A conflict between states on the highway to nukes. Other wars seemed less scary compared to a threat of the so-called "great powers" firing their nuclear stockpiles.
So, the 20th century taught the world to restrain from the use of the weapons of mass destruction – not to deploy, not to proliferate, not to threaten with, and not to test, but to promote a complete nuclear disarmament.
Frankly, this is a good strategy. But it should not be the only strategy to protect the world from this final war

Ukraine gave up its third largest nuclear arsenal. The world then decided Russia should become a keeper of such power. Yet, history shows it was Russia who deserved nuclear disarmament the most, back in the 1990s. And Russia deserves it now – terrorists have no right to hold nuclear weapons.
No right!
But truly not the nukes are the scariest now.
While nukes remain in place, the mass destruction is gaining its momentum. The aggressor is **weaponising** many other things and those things are used not only against our country but against all of yours as well.

Fellow leaders!
There are many conventions that restrict weapons but there are no real restrictions on **weaponisation.**
First, let me give you an example – the food.
Since the start of the full-scale war, the Ukrainian ports in the Black and Azov Seas have been blocked by Russia. Until now, our ports on the Danube River remain the target for missiles and drones. And it is a clear Russia's attempt to **weaponise** the food shortage on the global market in exchange for recognition for some, if not all, of the captured territories.
Russia is launching the food prices as weapons. The impact spans from the Atlantic coast of Africa to Southeast Asia. This is the threat scale.
I would like to thank those leaders who supported our Black Sea Grain Initiative, and programme "Grain from Ukraine". Thank you so much! United, we made weapons turn back into food again. More than 45 nations saw how important it is to make Ukrainian food products available on the market... from Algeria and Spain to Indonesia and China.

Even now when Russia has undermined the Black Sea Grain Initiative, we are working to ensure food stability. And I hope that many of you will join us in these efforts. We launched a temporary sea export corridor from our ports. And we are working hard to preserve the land routes for grain exports. And it is alarming to see how some in Europe, some of our friends in Europe, play out solidarity in a political theatre – making a thriller from the grain. They may seem to play their own role but in fact they are helping set the stage to a Moscow actor.

Second, **weaponisation** of energy.
Many times, the world has witnessed Russia using energy as a weapon. The Kremlin **weaponised** oil and gas to weaken the leaders of other countries when they came to the Red Square.
Now the threat is even greater. Russia is **weaponising** nuclear energy. Not only is it spreading its unreliable nuclear-power-plant-construction-technologies, but it is also turning other countries' power plants into real dirty bombs.
Look please what Russia did to our Zaporizhzhia power plant – shelled it, occupied it and now blackmails others with radiation leaks.
Is there any sense to reduce nuclear weapons when Russia is **weaponising** nuclear power plants? Scary question.
The global security architecture offers no response or protection against such a treacherous radiation threat. And there is no accountability for radiation blackmailers so far.

The third example is children.
Unfortunately, various terrorist groups abduct children to put pressure on their families and societies. But never before would mass kidnapping and deportation become a part of the government policy. Not until now.
We know the names of tens of thousands of children and have evidence on hundreds of thousands of others kidnapped by Russia in the occupied territories of Ukraine and later deported. The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Putin for this crime.
We are trying to get children back home but time goes by. What will happen to them?
Those children in Russia are taught to hate Ukraine, and all ties with their families are broken... This is clearly a genocide.
When hatred is **weaponised** against one nation, it never stops there. Each decade Russia starts a new war. Parts of Moldova and Georgia remain occupied. Russia turned Syria into ruins. And if it hadn't been for Russia, the chemical weapons would have never been used there in Syria. Russia has almost swallowed Belarus. It is obviously threatening Kazakhstan and the Baltic states... And the goal of the present war against Ukraine is to turn our land, our people, our lives, our resources into a weapon against you – against the international rules-based order. Many seats in the General Assembly Hall may become empty if Russia succeeds with its treachery and aggression.

Ladies and gentlemen!
The aggressor scatters death and brings ruins even without nukes but the outcomes are alike.
We see towns and villages in Ukraine wiped out by Russian artillery. Leveled to the ground completely!
We see the war of drones. We know the possible effects of spreading the war into cyberspace.

The artificial intelligence could be trained to combat well – before it would learn to help the humanity.
Thank God, people have not yet learned to use climate as a weapon. Even though humanity is failing on its climate policy objectives – this means that extreme weather will still impact normal global life and some evil state will also **weaponise** its outcomes. And when people in the streets of New York and other cities of the world went out on climate protest – we all have seen them... And when people in Morocco and Libya and other countries die as a result of natural disasters... And when islands and countries disappear under water... And when tornadoes and deserts are spreading into new

territories... And when all of this is happening one unnatural disaster in Moscow decided to launch a big war and kill tens of thousands of people. We have to stop it!

We must act united – to defeat the aggressor and focus all our capabilities and energy on addressing these challenges.
As nukes are restrained, likewise the aggressor must be restrained and all its tools and methods of war. Each war now can become final, but it takes our unity to make sure that aggression will not break in again.
And it is not a dialogue between the so-called "great powers" somewhere behind the closed doors that can guarantee us all the new no-wars-era, but open work of all nations for peace.

Last year, I presented the outlines of the Ukrainian Peace Formula at the UN General Assembly. Later in Indonesia, I presented the full Formula. And over the past year the Peace Formula became the basis to update the existing security architecture – now we can bring back to life the UN Charter and guarantee the full power of the rules-based world order.
Tomorrow I will present the details at a special meeting of the UN Security Council.

The main thing is that it is not only about Ukraine. More than 140 states and international organisations have supported the Ukrainian Peace Formula fully or in part. The Ukrainian Peace Formula is becoming global. Its points offer solutions and steps that will stop all forms of **weaponisation** that Russia used against Ukraine and other countries and may be used by other aggressors.

Look – for the first time in modern history, we have a real chance to end the aggression on the terms of the nation which was attacked. This is a real chance for every nation – to ensure that aggression against your state, if it happens, God forbid, will end not because your land will be divided and you will be forced to submit to military or political pressure, but because your territory and sovereignty will be fully restored.

We launched the format of meetings between national security advisors and diplomatic representatives. Important talks and consultations were held in Hiroshima, in Copenhagen, and in Jeddah on the implementation of the Peace Formula. And we are preparing a Global Peace Summit. I invite all of you – all of you who do not tolerate any aggression – to jointly prepare the Summit.

I am aware of the attempts to make some shady dealings behind the scenes. Evil cannot be trusted – ask Prigozhin if one bets on Putin's promises. Please, hear me. Let unity decide everything openly. While Russia is pushing the world to the final war, Ukraine is doing everything to ensure that after Russian aggression no one in the world will dare to attack any nation. **Weaponisation** must be restrained. War crimes must be punished. Deported people must come back home. And the occupier must return to their own land.

We must be united to make it. And we will do it.

Слава Україні!

Annex 2 The Authors and the HERitage UKRaine Project

This policy brief aligns with the project **HERitage UKRaine: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Heritage Diplomacy in Ukraine**, which addresses the role of cultural heritage in the EU's external action. Running from 2023 until 2026, HER-UKR is a consortium of 15 universities that brings together expertise on EU foreign policy and heritage diplomacy, Ukrainian and Eastern European memory politics, and heritage practices.

The project aims to establish a multidisciplinary research and education network that (1) generates, expands, and exchanges knowledge about EU heritage diplomacy and international cultural relations in general, and in Ukraine in particular; (2) collects, maps, and disseminates good practices in dealing with contested cultural heritage and cultural heritage preservation in East-Central Europe; and (3) provides European policymakers with solid expertise on developments in Ukraine's cultural heritage field.

An overview of the project's partners, activities and outcomes can be found on the following website and social media pages:
https://www.kuleuven.be/her-ukr
https://www.linkedin.com/company/106553359/

The authors of this report collaborate on the HERitage UKRaine project in their respective capacities as leader, collaborator, and coordinator:

Prof. Dr. Lien Verpoest is an Associate Professor in the History Department at KU Leuven, affiliated with the research group Modernity and Society. She has held key academic leadership roles as Programme Director of the Master of History (2023–2025) and is currently Programme Director of the Master of European Studies: Transnational and Global Perspectives (2025–2029). Her academic training spans Slavic and East European Studies (KU Leuven and Saint Petersburg State University) and International Politics (University of Lund). She holds a PhD in Political Science focused on geopolitical pluralism and state isomorphism in the post-Soviet space. Verpoest's research sits at the intersection of history and political science, combining comparative historical analysis with foreign policy analysis. Her primary geographical focus is the East Slavic region—Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—with particular attention to diplomatic relations, East–West interaction, and the role of liminal cultural and heritage actors in international diplomacy. Over the past four years, she has led and coordinated research on cultural heritage in contexts of armed conflict, with a strong focus on Ukraine. She was promotors of the CELSA COHERE project on contested heritage in Ukraine (2020–2022) and currently leads the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Policy Debate HERitage UKRaine project on heritage diplomacy. Her earlier work examined EU perceptions of Ukraine and Russian perceptions of the EU, and she co-supervised the KU Leuven CONNECTIVITY programme on the contestation of global governance (2018–2024).

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Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), as well as its interactions with private actors (Sport Governing Bodies). Ongoing research explores the EU as a heritage actor in international relations, with a focus on areas such as Traditional Chinese Medicine and heritage destruction (securitisation).

Dr. Daryna Zhyvohliadova is the researcher and the Project Coordinator for the HERitage UKRaine project at the research group on Modernity and Society in the History Department of the faculty of Arts, KU Leuven. Her research is situated on the tangent between heritage diplomacy and cultural management, with a focus on contemporary knowledge exchange practices, cultural policies, and strategies for safeguarding cultural heritage in wartime. With the PhD from Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv and fellowships from University of Technology Sydney and the University of Maribor, she also has experience on consultancy and conducting policy reports on heritage policy and international cultural cooperation for the European Commission, UNFPA, ALIPH Foundation, Europa Nostra, and the Cultural Relations Platform.

About REKA
The Russia and Eastern Europe Knowledge Alliance (REKA) is a knowledge platform established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It comprises a broad and inclusive network of experts and aims to increase the existing knowledge in the Netherlands regarding Russia and Eastern Europe, communicate this knowledge to the public and the Dutch government. 'REKA' – Russian for river – therefore refers to the flow of knowledge that this network aims to set into motion.

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