

Loss and Rebuilding of Historical Sites in Ukraine After the War with Russia in the Context of Balkan Experiences

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Abstract:

The article examines the loss and potential restoration of Ukrainian cultural heritage following the 2022 war, drawing parallels with the reconstruction of cultural heritage in the Balkans in the aftermath of the Balkan wars. A considerable amount of damage has been inflicted upon Ukrainian historical sites, including churches, theatres and museums, which has had a detrimental impact upon the nation's cultural identity. The authors analyse the historical preservation of cultural heritage in accordance with the 1954 Hague Convention, discussing how Ukraine's efforts align with international heritage protection protocols. The experiences of Croatia and Bosnia, which undertook post-conflict cultural restoration in the 1990s, offer strategic insights for Ukraine. The article suggests that Ukraine can benefit from international guidance, like the Warsaw Recommendations, to reconstruct heritage sites. This framework emphasises not only restoring physical structures but also cultural memory and communal spaces. The authors conclude that while rebuilding will be challenging and resource-intensive, past European efforts provide valuable templates that could help preserve Ukraine's cultural legacy amidst ongoing conflict.

Keywords: cultural heritage, Ukraine, war, Balkans, monument protection

Introduction

Destruction of cultural heritage sites on the territory of Ukraine occurs at points, as a result of missile attacks, but also occurs on a wider scale, holistically, in zones of active military operations. In areas periodically occupied by the Russians, acts of vandalism occur, e.g. looting of museum collections, destruction of library book collections, cultural centres important for local communities. The urban fabric forming the urban landscape is being destroyed [Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine 2024].

In the course of the analysis, it was decided that the article would focus exclusively on immovable monuments. Information on their fate is constantly updated and relatively easy to verify. The issue of movable monuments and intangible cultural heritage, which is extremely important for the Ukrainian nation, has been omitted due to access to data.

International law indicates a number of instruments related to the protection of cultural heritage in the conditions of armed conflict and post-conflict [Hague Convention 1954; UNESCO 2018]. The analysis of the collected material showed that the adequate tools that must be applied in relation to the ongoing armed conflict are: holding the aggressor state responsible for crimes against cultural heritage, access to international expert and financial assistance, and the involvement of international heritage protection organisations in the restoration process. The indication of how the available instruments were successfully used in the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, in the context of historic sites, is a novel take on the issue.

Historical Heritage in Wartime: Overview of the Literature

Protection and restoration of cultural heritage is a process involving not only state and local authorities, but also the local community, experts in heritage restoration, management of the restoration and development process. Human-induced risks caused by armed conflict deserve a separate analysis and study, creation of the concept of restoration of cultural heritage as a component of public goods at the local or national level, inclusion of all interested parties in this process (Fig. 1).

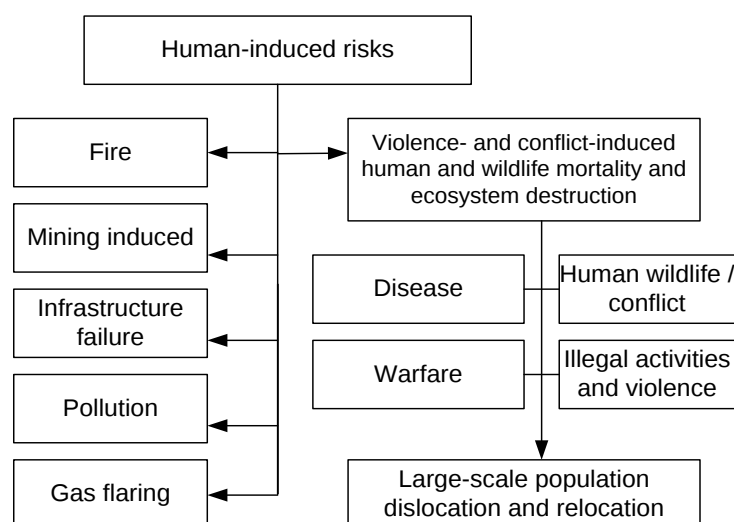


Fig. 1. Typology of human-induced hazards for cultural heritage

Source: own design based on UNESCO 2010

Russia's full-scale aggression caused a reaction by UNESCO regarding the protection of the cultural heritage of Ukraine, which relies on a number of protocols for the protection of heritage, including the Hague Convention of 1954 with the amended protocol of 1999 [Ukraine: UNESCO statement 2022; UNESCO 2023]. Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2347 and full implementation of the proposals involves a number of actions, including:

- maintaining and improving the practice of compiling the register of cultural heritage objects on the ground, primarily the formation of digital data, where possible, to make available to the relevant authorities and relevant institutions involved in the management and preservation of cultural heritage;
- creation of specialized divisions of central and local government bodies, cooperation with law enforcement and customs services, judicial authorities to record crimes in the zone of military conflict or caused as a result of terrorist actions of the aggressor country;
- development of educational programs on cultural heritage protection to train specialists and stakeholders for effective cooperation [Resolution 2347 (2017), UN Security Council].

Catastrophic consequences lead to the loss of human, economic, and material potential [UNESCO 2010; EU 2024]. This means that large-scale military actions lead not only to the loss of objects of cultural heritage, but also to the environment in which they are located, to the destruction of the community that takes care of this object and maintains it in the condition necessary for cultural heritage.

The discussion of cultural heritage's recovery after armed conflicts and their authenticity accompanied with current political, social, and cultural context in a particular country [Layton et al. 2001]. This thought linked to a new understanding of valuable cultural sites, their impact on post-war society, and commemoration process [Kalman 2017]. From the perspectives of the international law, the blue shield is recognized as a sign for cultural protection of objects [Cuno, Weiss 2022]. But, in reality, three sectors (humanitarian, uniformed one as media, and heritage sector) do not cooperate in terms of protecting cultural sites, especially in case of violence from the side of invaders [Baženova 2024].

Methodology. Research Design and Data Collection

Work on the present paper included a comparative analysis of the literature and current legislation. The analysis of quantitative data was carried out in several stages: the division of cultural heritage objects by types was carried out on the basis of the state register of cultural heritage objects of national and local importance based on official register of cultural heritage in Ukraine [Ministry of Culture of Ukraine 2013; Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2022a].

The creation of an own register at lower administrative levels is related to the lack of a list of objects according to the new administrative division approved by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine [Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2022a]. The motivation for the creation of such a register is related to the detailing of the differences at the level of the administrative district of the differences in the loss and damage of cultural heritage [Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2022b]. At one administrative level (here – the region), there may be differences, whether this territory is: a) on the front line and in the zone of active operations; b) in the occupation zone or was in the occupation zone; c) areas outside active hostilities (rear zone of hostilities).

In this article, the study of cultural heritage has several stages:

1. Assessment of the level of destruction and damage to Ukraine's cultural heritage. The source of information was the website of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy [2022], which is not available as of 2024 due to the issue of sensitive information contained in this register of damaged and destroyed objects.
2. At the second stage of the study, all objects were divided into three groups: destroyed, destroyed and damaged based on available images of objects after Russia's military actions.
3. At the final stage of the research, the literature related to similar experiences in the countries of the Balkan region and the project of restoration of cultural heritage in Ukraine was studied. This project has a systemic nature, but the continuation of Russia's military actions, the consequences of shelling and destruction may affect the implementation of the project.

Restoration of Cultural Heritage After the War of Independence: The Case of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Historical sites were damaged in small towns and villages, but also in major historical centres of world renown (Dubrovnik and Vukovar in Croatia, Sarajevo and Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina) [Hadžimuhamedović 2018]. The scale of historical site destruction in Croatia is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Typology of damaged individual cultural monuments and historical complexes in Croatia (as of January 1993) [PACE 1993b]

Type of cultural monument	Number
<i>Individual monuments:</i>	
Palaces and mansions	249
Fortresses	37
Churches	468
Monasteries	42
Public sculptures	11
Tombs and cemeteries	11
Commercial buildings	4
Total	801
<i>Historical complexes:</i>	
Memorial sites	1
Historical cities	48
Historical villages	274
Historical building complexes	17
Archaeological sites	10
Total	350

They were undertaken by international organisations working with state institutions as well as local communities. These initiatives were accompanied by numerous reports describing the scale of wartime damage and presenting rebuilding plans.

The reconstruction of historical sites was a part of these, but implementing the plans turned out to be incompatible with the reality and the actual action taken by local governments in cooperation with international organisations. One of the reasons for this was that it was not until after the war that the governments in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina started a full inventory of the cultural heritage on their territory. The extent of the damage was assessed during the war as well as after

it ended. As a result, after military operations ceased, the rebuilding of historical sites was much slower and more difficult than in Croatia.

All of the leading international organisations became involved in rebuilding damaged historical sites in the Balkans: UNESCO, ICOMOS [ICOMOS 1964], ICCROM and the World Bank. Some of them took part very actively in rebuilding damaged resources, especially those with the greatest world heritage value. Such cooperation included expert and financial assistance. Smaller entities also joined in reconstruction-related activity, providing financial support in the first stage of rebuilding damaged historical sites. However, over time the assistance of these institutions changed, becoming purely advisory in nature, mainly connected with managing restored heritage sites [Stengård, Legnér 2019]. Most of the recommendations of international missions related to sites of local significance were limited to damage assessment and active collaboration with local authorities in an advisory capacity.

Although almost 30 years have passed since the armed conflict in the Balkans, many structures have still not been rebuilt; fortunately, none of the most valuable historical sites are among them.

The post-war recovery in Bosnia and Herzegovina faced organizational obstacles such as unverified information about a level of damaged cultural heritage and independently prepared reports by its institutions during the war. The recovery process needs to be more accuracy based on verified information about destroyed cultural sites, and documentations about cultural objects [Walasek et al. 2015].

The most difficult cooperation was between the different ethnic groups in the two countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia after the war with Serbian invasion. Contrary to claims of enormous international resources being involved in rebuilding Croatia, it should be noted that over 50% of the funding for the country's reconstruction came from the state budget [Perković 2001]. The Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development, private individuals and businesses, and other sources also provided money to rebuild historical sites in Croatia [Zakon o gradnji 2019].

At the same time, people who were actively involved in rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina said that it was rather chaotic. They said that it wasn't connected to the plans and programs written during or immediately after the war. These people emphasize that the efforts were "project-oriented", meaning they focused on one need of the local community, which was then fulfilled and supported with international

grants. For example, they rebuilt schools and homes for widows. Restoring historical sites was not a priority in a country that had just been through a war. The first things to be rebuilt were schools, hospitals, homes, roads, and critical infrastructure. They cleaned and fixed public spaces, historical heritage sites, and new projects to remember traumatic wartime events.

The recollections of people who took an active, organisational part in rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina indicate activities that were rather chaotic, disconnected from the plans and programmes written during or immediately after the war. These people emphasise the “project-oriented” character of the measures undertaken, which focused on one – not necessarily the most important – need of a local community, which was then fulfilled and supported under international grants, e.g., the construction of homes for widows or rebuilding of schools. Restoring historical sites was not a priority in a country ravaged by war. Schools, hospitals, homes, roads and critical infrastructure were the first to be rebuilt. Public spaces were cleared and restored; alongside historical heritage, new projects commemorating traumatic wartime events found an important place there².

Research Results: Russian Invasion and Cultural Heritage in Danger

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the destruction of many historical sites, which numbered 529 as of the end of November 2022 (Table 2). These sites have been identified within the active military operation zone as well as in already liberated territories. The attacks mainly target critical infrastructure in cities, including those lying far away from the front lines.

Table 2. Number of destroyed cultural objects and Russian missile attacks on Ukraine (24 February 2022 – 29 November 2022)¹

	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November
Destroyed objects of cultural heritage	19	274	86	73	25	25	8	18	1	0
Number of Russian missile attacks	83	99	106	92	200	262	137	185	287	116

Source: own calculation based on open-source newspapers and reports [Ukrajinska Pravda, Cencor.net and reports of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 2022]

The greatest damage and destruction were reported in the first stage of the war, from March to May 2022. It was the result of direct land military operations in northern, eastern and southern Ukraine, with active air bombing of Ukrainian cities and towns, and coincided with the area of the farthest extent of the Russian occupation.

As the front line came to a halt and then the Russian forces were driven from part of the territories they had occupied, the intensity of destruction of historical sites decreased over time, see Table 3. An important role was also played by the creation of an air defence system. According to other sources, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Information Policy reported that up to 21 November 2022 the occupying Russians had damaged 800 cultural heritage sites. A large part of these were sites of religious worship [Zalasińska, Brodowska 2023].

Table 3 presents the number of heritage sites in individual regions that suffered in the war. Each time, the degree of destruction of cultural heritage is assessed by a commission appointed by state or local-government authorities, in association with public institutions dealing with cultural heritage protection.

Table 3. Current aftermath of Russian missile attacks and armed invasion of Ukraine for cultural heritage, by region and level of destruction as of 23 August 2022 and of 6 May 2024 [Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2022b; Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2024]

Region	2022				2024
	destroyed	ruined	damaged	total	total
Donetsk	25	35	23	83	125
Luhansk	8	17	15	40	30*
Kharkiv	5	22	29	56	299
Sumy	4	2	14	20	25
Chernihiv	3	7	18	28	71
Kyiv region	6	5	23	34	69
Kyiv city	0	0	5	5	
Zhytomyr	0	1	4	5	4*
Zaporizhzhia	1	4	6	11	44
Kherson	2	2	1	5	144
Mykolaiv	1	3	4	8	44
Odesa	0	0	2	2	115
Dnipropetrovsk	0	0	1	1	
Lviv	0	0	1	1	36
Vinnitsia	0	0	1	1	nd

* number of damaged cultural heritage can be differed because of approach of counting sites as heritage (MCSC 2024) or valuable objects out of Register [MCSC 2022b]

Exploring data from previous reports of Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications in 2022 and 2024 (Table 3), it indicates rising number of destroyed objects of cultural heritage, especially in areas with active military operations such as Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv regions.

Among architectural structures, the greatest damage has been reported in the Donetsk region, many villages and towns (Fig. 2). In this region, out of 98 historical sites listed as damaged immovable heritage (status as of 21 November 2022), architectural structures formed the great majority, at 89 sites [Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2022b].

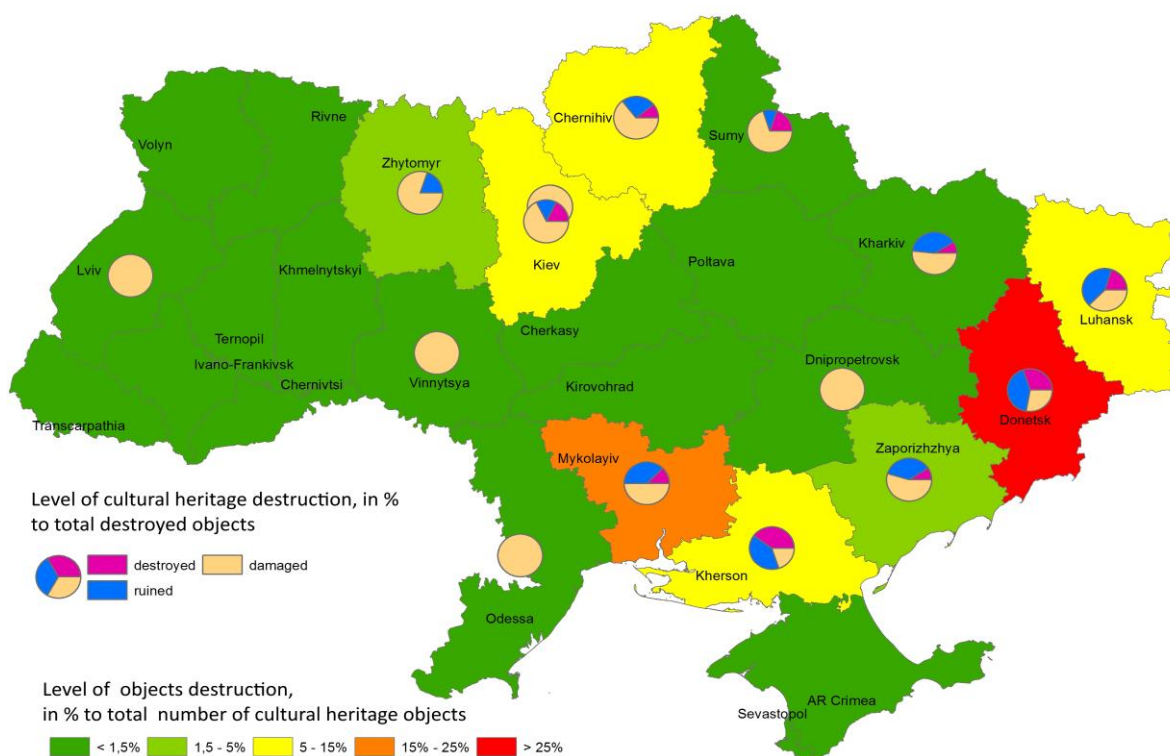


Fig. 2. Level of damaged cultural heritage by regions, on November 2022

Source: own elaboration based on Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2022b

The most common types of damaged cultural heritage are architectural (307 objects), historical (326) sites as on May 2024 [Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2024; Basset et al. 2023].

The Warsaw Recommendation as a Set of Universal Principles for Rebuilding Damaged Historical Sites

The tragedy of the destruction of cultural heritage resources during armed conflict, especially historical urban areas and archaeological sites, is a widespread occurrence and one that does not find justification or acceptance among

the international community. At the same time, with the development of knowledge on the importance of the diversity of cultures and heritages for building national identity, there is a growing need for their protection, also by developing rules for the reconstruction not only of world heritage property but also sites important to local communities. A special example of such principles is the *Warsaw Recommendation on Recovery and Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage*, a document adopted during *The Challenges of World Heritage Recovery: International Conference on Reconstruction*, held at the Royal Castle in Warsaw on 8 May 2018, subsequently passed on to the World Heritage Committee to serve as the basis for detailed guidelines, case studies and examples of best practice [UNESCO 2018].

The term “reconstruction” as adopted in the Warsaw Recommendation is understood very broadly, not just as a technical process aimed at restoring physical resources and infrastructure but, equally importantly, as recreating intangible cultural practices and traditional knowledge that are essential for upholding the cultural values of local communities. This also applies to new resources originating from traumatic wartime events. Commemorating destruction through a site’s interpretation or presentation, through the proper display of some relics left after the conflict, should help keep future visitors to the site appropriately educated and informed.

One of the main recommendations is that of maintaining proper documentation and inventorying a given cultural resource. This is of key importance not only for rebuilding in a technical context, but also for restoring a resource’s authenticity and integrity. The recommendation also points out that documenting a resource is a continuous process that should not only be based on archival materials but should also take advantage of the options offered by the best possible new technologies.

Whereas rebuilding infrastructure, housing resources, the economy and education is understandable, the document also recommends gradual and complementary decision making related to the reconstruction of historical urban areas, which also means planning enough time for reflection before reaching a decision, including ideas related to commemorating the events that led to a given resource’s destruction. This purpose is to be served by heritage rebuilding and reconstruction projects as well as urban planning, especially that based on the Historic Urban Landscape concept.

The process of rebuilding spaces of appropriate quality in Ukraine is sure to be prolonged and very costly; the international community will support Ukraine’s

national and local authorities in this process [Ivashko et al. 2024]. Unfortunately, as the scale of destruction in cities shows, especially in eastern Ukraine, the global experience of rebuilding historical urban areas will now have to be supplemented with these new experiences.

Future for Ukrainian Cultural Heritage: Possibility of Restoration

The key issue here seems to be the Warsaw Recommendation's "time for reflection" on combining the restoration of damaged historical sites with the commemoration of traumatic events related to Russia's attack on Ukraine. The example of post-World War II European cities shows a variety of possible options. Historical sites were often rebuilt as separate urban (e.g., the old town centre of Dubrovnik) or rural units. This depended on the value of such a site for the history and culture of a given country or region.

These organisations would conduct research, e.g. on the area of Ukrainian historical settlement, its protection and development.

Future Plan of Restoration in Ukraine includes in the section Culture and Information Policy [Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine 2024a] the main challenges:

1. gross violation by the enemy of the fundamental principles and universally recognized norms of international law;
2. A real threat to the preservation of the national cultural heritage of Ukraine and its cultural values;
3. Loss of cultural property and cultural heritage of Ukraine and threat to the viability of elements of intangible cultural heritage;
4. Illegal, violent and unjust actions of the Russian occupiers in relation to the cultural heritage of Ukraine;
5. The vast majority of cultural heritage sites are in need of restoration;
6. Suspension of budgetary funds for restoration and rehabilitation of cultural heritage;
7. Determination of damage to the movable cultural heritage of Ukraine;
8. Protection of movable cultural heritage during martial law (in the war zone, in the occupied territories, in the de-occupied territories).
9. Development of guidelines for the protection of movable cultural heritage during hostilities;

10. Creation of new storage facilities in museums, as well as backup storage facilities for displaced collections of movable cultural property.

Ministry of Culture and Information Policy in 2023 indicated key possibilities to preserve cultural heritage as follows:

1. Development of scientific and technical potential of Ukrainian specialists in the field of preservation of cultural heritage;
2. Development of new restoration technologies;
3. Creation of a unified digital register of movable cultural heritage;
4. Creation of programs for the protection of movable cultural heritage;
5. Renewal of the material and technical base of museums ;
6. Renovation of old and creation of new storage facilities;
7. Establishment of a partnership network with international partners for a joint network of temporary evacuation sites for collections.

This Plan has three steps for recovery of cultural heritage (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Stages of Plan of Rebuild of Ukraine, working group 'Culture and Information Policy', section 'Cultural Heritage', 2022

Source: own elaboration based on Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine 2024a

In accordance with the aforementioned plan, the initial phase entailed the stabilization of damaged cultural heritage and its subsequent comparison with the official Register of Cultural Heritage. The subsequent phase could potentially involve the verification of the number of damaged cultural heritage items through the creation of a digital platform for the cataloging of damaged cultural heritage objects. With regard to the year 2024, this phase is currently underway. In conclusion, it is essential that this Plan attract investments from a variety of sources, including

the national budget of Ukraine, local and regional funds, and international organizations engaged in reconstruction and cultural preservation (Fig. 4).

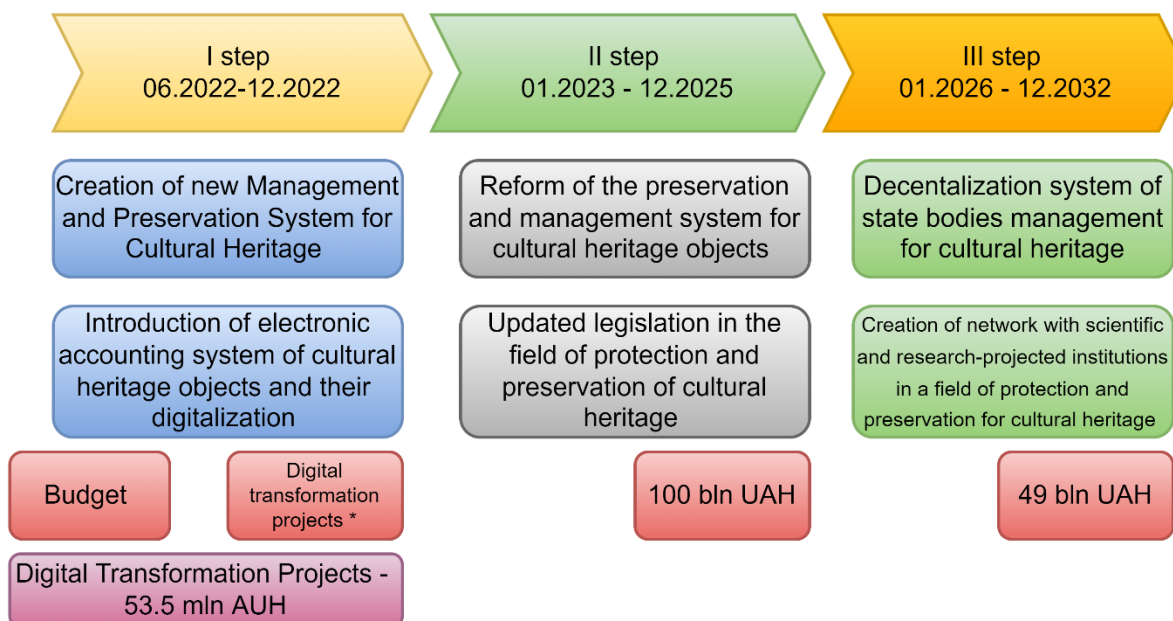


Fig. 4. Budget needs for Project of Plan of Rebuild of Ukraine, working group 'Culture and Information Policy', section 'Cultural Heritage', 2022

Source: own elaboration based on Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine 2024a

Conclusions

Warfare, irrespective of the area in which it took place, always led to enormous damage to the settlement fabric, infrastructure, nature and monuments. Reconstructing the pre-war condition of towns and villages is a difficult, often impossible task. This is particularly true of historic buildings, which are irretrievably damaged as a result of warfare. However, the example of European cities after the Second World War and Balkan cities in the 1990s gives hope that Ukrainian cities too will be rebuilt after the cessation of military action. At the same time, the willingness of countries that have gone through the reconstruction process to share their difficult experiences in this area provides a great opportunity for Ukraine not to make the mistakes that were unavoidable in past years.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. The information was collected from open sources of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine and from Ukrainian mass media: Ukrpravda (<https://www.pravda.com.ua/>), Censor.net (<https://censor.net/en>).
2. The interview of the Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Poland was taken at the scientific workshop, December 6, 2022, Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Science. The title of that seminar was connected with topic of this article.

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Utrata i odbudowa miejsc historycznych w Ukrainie po wojnie z Rosją w kontekście doświadczeń bałkańskich

Abstrakt:

W artykule zanalizowano straty i potencjalną odbudowę ukraińskiego dziedzictwa kulturowego po wojnie rozpoczętej w 2022 roku, rysując podobieństwa z odbudową dziedzictwa kulturowego na Bałkanach po wojnach bałkańskich. Ukraińskie obiekty historyczne, w tym kościoły, teatry i muzea, zostały w znacznym stopniu zniszczone, co ma destrukcyjny wpływ na tożsamość kulturową narodu. Autorzy analizują historyczną ochronę dziedzictwa kulturowego zgodnie z Konwencją Haską z 1954 roku, omawiając, w jaki sposób wysiłki Ukrainy są zgodne z międzynarodowymi protokołami ochrony dziedzictwa. Doświadczenia Chorwacji i Bośni, które podjęły się odbudowy kultury po konflikcie w latach 90. XX wieku, oferują strategiczne wskazówki dla Ukrainy. Autorzy wykazują, że Ukraina może skorzystać z międzynarodowych wytycznych, takich jak Zalecenia Warszawskie, w celu rekonstrukcji obiektów dziedzictwa kulturowego. Ramy te kładą nacisk nie tylko na przywracanie struktur fizycznych, ale także pamięci kulturowej i przestrzeni wspólnych. Autorzy konkludują, że choć odbudowa będzie wyzwaniem i będzie wymagała dużych zasobów, wcześniejsze europejskie wysiłki dostarczają cennych wzorców, które mogą pomóc zachować dziedzictwo kulturowe Ukrainy w obliczu trwającego konfliktu.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo kulturowe, Ukraina, wojna, Bałkany, ochrona zabytków