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Protection of intangible cultural heritage in Ukraine in the condition of military challenges

The UNESCO Convention of 2003 “On the protection of intangible cultural heritage” acquires a new meaning and application in Ukraine and the entire civilised world. Today, the aggressor country is trying to destroy the Ukrainian population as the bearers and embodiment of Ukrainian culture, language and folklore traditions. Ethno-cultural factors play a significant role in the modern processes of identification and decolonisation. As an international organisation, UNESCO has at its disposal the appropriate mechanisms to ensure the application of certain provisions of the Convention, regarding the preservation of both Ukraine’s cultural assets and intangible cultural heritage in the conditions of military aggression.

It is the loss of the human factor, the bearers of folklore traditions, that constitutes a threat to national identity. Therefore, today it is important to record the testimonies of the war from forced refugees and displaced persons, as much as it is possible. Particular attention should be given to the current situation of preserving the intangible cultural heritage of national minorities in Ukraine, such as Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians, and Crimean Tatars, which has now come under threat.

This task will be facilitated by the vast experience Ukrainian scientists already possess with regard to implementing joint international projects with Poland and Bulgaria to preserve intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, over the past decades the scientists of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine have conducted comprehensive folklore and ethnographic research. This led to the creation of a comprehensive digital database of field materials, some of which was published in the series entitled “Ethnographic image of modern Ukraine”, edited by Hanna

Skrypnyk and issued by the M. Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristic and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. These data allow us to consider ethno-cultural phenomena in a long historical retrospective, and trace the influence socio-cultural factors have on the peculiarities of their functioning.

The ongoing war in Ukraine, unleashed by Russia in February 2022, calls into question not only such fundamental values as security, the right to self-determination, honour and the survival of loved ones, but also those elements that are the most essential for the survival of a particular community and nationality, in material as well as symbolic terms. In this context, Ukrainian citizens typically mention objects and phenomena that do not necessarily have any measurable economic value, but represent a given community's sense of identity, its identification with a certain culture, region and environment. Together, these elements create a specific cultural code that has absorbed a unique memory passed down by the previous generations, the realities of life in the modern era, and a legacy for the future generations. Cultural achievements, in all their manifestations and spheres of existence (artistic, historical, social, customary, culinary, etc.), also become part of collective memory, a source of knowledge about cultural genealogy, and a constant object of interpretation and reinterpretation. In many cases, it is also a source of cognitive dissonance and local or international conflicts, sometimes even an object of collective trauma, which is transmitted to future generations. The anthropological research perspective allows for an inclusive approach to understanding the cultural heritage of each group. In the case of neighbouring states and nations connected (or divided) by a common history, such studies may prove particularly challenging. Their analysis and interpretation can, however, increase awareness and lead to rethinking past events and the formation of mutual relations in the future.

The purpose of this study is to review the challenges that Ukrainian cultural heritage is presently facing. In the light of the current political events – the war that is taking place in Ukraine – there is much need for reflection on how to protect intangible cultural heritage, and how to revitalise it. The possibility for dialogue and an anthropological methodological approach will allow for the formation of common narratives and cooperation in the search and analysis of sources. Research initiates this process by examining the testimonies of eyewitnesses of the Russo-Ukrainian War and their views on the intangible cultural heritage of Ukraine.

UNESCO convention for the protection of the intangible cultural heritage and the Russo-Ukrainian War

In 2008, Ukraine joined the “Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage”, which UNESCO adopted in 2003. In 2018, a representative list of intangible cultural heritage sites of Ukraine in need of protection was created. It included five sites, two of which required immediate protection. Ukraine’s Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications created and approved the “National list of intangible cultural heritage sites of Ukraine” (61 sites) in need of protection. This is only a fraction of the number of sites which require protection, since the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War constitutes a threat to the entire Ukrainian culture as a holistic system.

Representatives of scientific and cultural communities need to be aware of the level of risk for national culture during wartime, when cultural monuments and museum values are destroyed, and national identity is under threat and may be lost. This in turn necessitates an intensification of research on the problems of preserving cultural heritage in the context of war.

In the current circumstances of full-scale military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the issues of preserving the intangible cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples of Ukraine and national minorities are of particular importance, bearing on the integrity and unity of the society. In this regard, there is a need to study and protect the intangible cultural heritage of each nation inhabiting Ukraine, especially at a time when millions of citizens have been forced to become refugees and internal migrants. The task involves analysing the cultural and national policies in each state, particularly those regarding national communities, which is an important factor for the democratisation of society. This determines the relevance of the developed theoretical principles for an in-depth study of the problems of (national) identity at the theoretical and methodological level, as well as at the practical, socio-cultural level. Through conducting new comprehensive studies, Ukrainian scientists will be able to reach the level of modern European science and to demonstrate the place of Ukrainian culture on a broader, global level. This will allow for its contribution to European civilisation to be assessed.

The employees of all departments of the Ukrainian Ethnological Center and Ukrainian and Foreign Folklore Studies of the M. Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (hereinafter referred to as the MRIASFE) have many years of experience in studying the traditional heritage of the Ukrainian people. In the context of research on

this topic, there is a number of publications dedicated to the issue of the current state of Ukrainian ethno-culture and its place in the Slavic or, more broadly, European community (Skrypnyk, Vakhnina 2021, 384). The problem of considering traditional culture in the context of modern military threats and migration processes remains relevant in today's science.

The aim of future research during the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine will be to monitor the functioning of intangible cultural heritage in the territories liberated from Russian occupation, where the above-mentioned UNESCO Convention should be applied, under the control of local communities and Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications, as well as relevant international organisations and observers. After all, the traditional cultures of the Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians of the Northern Azov region, Donbass and Kherson region have nowadays come under threat. In addition to destruction, it is necessary to record the loss of elements of intangible cultural heritage and make it public, based on international legal principles.

Special attention will be given to research devoted to modern ethno-cultural processes. The creation of the concept of cultural integrity will correspond to such tasks as the study of forms of intercultural communication, through which a universal cultural model will be outlined that will bring together the diversity of individual cultural traditions, and identify characteristic features that ensure the dynamic development and viability of all components of intangible cultural heritage in historically and geographically determined ethno-cultural differences in the contemporary Ukrainian space.

Research is vital for conducting a comparative analysis of Ukrainian ethno-culture in terms of national, social and local identity. This concerns the updating of folklore and ethnological research, which will allow for traditional approaches to be combined with modern methods. It will be necessary to analyse changes and transformations in the ethno-cultural aspects of different Ukrainian regions. It is important to immediately start working towards creating new lists of intangible cultural heritage elements that require immediate protection and safeguarding. It is through the National Commission of Ukraine for UNESCO under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, which coordinates national institutions with UNESCO, that we should act promptly to submit the aforementioned issues to the management of UNESCO and its relevant committees. These efforts should be carried out not only by scholars and teachers, but also by museum workers and the cultural departments of local administration. Attention must be paid to the modern functioning of traditional culture and folklore in the context of present military challenges.

Future scientific research will involve not only examining the degree to which

traditional cultural phenomena have survived and still function, but also monitoring war testimonies recorded by respondents who experienced the tragic events of modern history. This documentary evidence, in addition to its scientific significance, can play a significant role in recording war crimes. Studies will also focus on modern factors that cause transformations within cultures, as well as changes in the minds of tradition bearers. The latest research on the functioning of intangible cultural heritage in Ukraine and modern forms of living and transmission will be summarised.

The relevant provisions of the UNESCO Convention (2003) contribute to the accumulation of experience in preserving intangible cultural heritage in many countries around the world. Ukrainian cultural heritage, which is unique, is currently experiencing significant losses and destruction as a result of the aggression of the Russian Federation. The cynicism lies in the fact that the aggressor has declared 2022 to be the year of preservation of the intangible cultural heritage of the peoples of Russia. Today, the Russian Federation is trying to destroy the Ukrainian national identity, language, and cultural traditions. UNESCO should therefore take a clearer stance on the full-scale war the Russian Federation is waging against Ukraine in the international cultural and legislative context. Moreover, it ought to revise the provisions pertaining to the representative function of this heritage, which should contribute to the progress of national cultures at the international level. The role of ethno-cultural factors in modern processes of identification is important and should be recognised as such.

As an international organisation, UNESCO has at its disposal the appropriate mechanisms for applying individual provisions of the Convention regarding the preservation of both the cultural heritage of Ukraine and its intangible cultural heritage in the conditions of military aggression. This was stated by the Corresponding Member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences Mila Santova in her speech at the roundtable (the event was held at the M. Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in 2015) entitled “Humanitarian challenges and social consequences of military actions in Eastern Ukraine”, which touched upon the actions in Donbas and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in such critical situations. At a time when military action against Ukraine in Donbas was already underway, Santova emphasised the importance of using a special mechanism provided by international agreements on the preservation of elements of intangible cultural heritage. This means creating a special register which includes monuments that are at risk in times of war. In 2015, Santova recalled the relevant UNESCO “Lists of intangible cultural heritage and the register of good safeguarding practices”

(see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists#2015>, accessed February 18, 2025; Vakhnina 2015, 57–58). Therefore, taking into account the experience of our foreign colleagues who took part in the development and adoption of relevant documents, it is necessary for the National Commission of Ukraine for UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture of Ukrainian and Strategic Communications to address UNESCO's leadership. Ukrainian culture is presently under threat. It is imperative that elements of Ukrainian intangible cultural heritage be included in the important UNESCO list for urgent protection. Appropriate mechanisms have been developed for such purposes, most notably the operational DIRECTIVES. This issue should now become the object of joint concern and increased activity of the relevant government structures and scientists.

In recent years, these issues have been at the centre of discussion at many international forums, scientific conferences, and seminars (e.g., the XIV European conference on folk culture; the annual Slavic conferences at the V. Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine; the Drynovsky readings at the M.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University; the Odessa ethnographic readings, etc.). The international scientific conference commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences “Intangible cultural heritage: Current issues” (Sofia, 2019) played an important role. Materials from the conference were published in a scientific collection (Santova *et al.* 2021), which also contains reports by two Ukrainian scholars: Oksana Mykytenko and the author of the present chapter.

The MRIASFE has experience in international projects related to the preservation of tangible cultural heritage, undertaken together with scientists from Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary. The new joint Ukrainian-Polish inter-academic project between the MRIASFE and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, entitled “Polish-Ukrainian borderland: Interethnic relations and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage” (implementation period 2022–2024), is an ongoing enterprise. It is aimed at studying the negative changes caused by the full-scale military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, and the resulting challenges for the societies of Ukraine and Poland (multi-million migration processes, destruction of cultural values, etc.). MRIASFE employees also participate in the international scientific project “Testimony of war”, whose scope includes the collection and study of documentary materials from internally displaced persons and refugees in various European countries who provided temporary shelter to Ukrainian citizens.

The question of the national identity of all peoples living in Ukraine is becoming increasingly significant. Ethno-cultural transformations in modern culture feature new approaches to the traditional perception of purely local phenomena

and processes that have in recent years become more prevalent in ethnology and folklore in Europe and the world, affecting the theoretical and practical aspects of various scientific disciplines. A more comprehensive approach to the issue must take into account the multifaceted nature of ethno-cultural phenomena and their definitions.

MRIASFE Director Hanna Skrypnyk has led many scientific projects, edited numerous publications, and organised several international academic conferences, one of which (entitled “Sources and paths of traditional European cultures in the twenty first century”) was held under the auspices of the International Organization for Folklore IOV (UNESCO) in 2013. She was also involved in the International Congress of Ukrainian Studies in Kyiv (2013), roundtable talks on topical issues of the humanities and the present, which are regularly held at the MRIASFE with the participation of university teachers and museum experts and representatives of state authorities, most notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kyiv City State Administration. The MRIASFE has developed a methodology for studying the problems and preservation of ethno-cultural phenomena after the Chernobyl accident, and has launched relevant programmes on cultural ecology. The Institute under Skrypnyk’s leadership studies migration processes in the context of modern challenges of globalisation. The issues of studying and popularising elements of Ukrainian culture and including them in the UNESCO Representative List were addressed by MRIASFE scientists Halyna Bondarenko and Valentyna Borysenko, who also participated in the Expert Council on Intangible Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine. They are the authors of monographs and a series of publications. Bondarenko is one of the first ethnologists in Ukraine to constantly apply the method of ethno-sociological monitoring ethno-cultural phenomena through studying the population of Ukraine (Bondarenko 2014).

It should be noted that art historians associated with the MRIASFE have also joined this cause. For example, the Department of Fine and Decorative Arts held a seminar on April 5, 2022, dedicated to the preservation of Ukrainian cultural heritage during the Russo-Ukrainian War. MRIASFE’s Department of Ukrainian and Foreign Folklore Studies is currently conducting a new research project entitled “The Russian-Ukrainian War in modern folklore: Anthropological dimensions”.

Conclusions

The intangible cultural heritage of Ukraine represents various phenomena and aspects of folk traditions as a single system of communication that forms the national identity of the people. The loss of human resources can negatively affect society, cultural borders, and the humanitarian sphere of our country in general. Therefore, the study of intangible cultural heritage and its protection in the context of Russian aggression should become one of the priority areas for Ukrainian humanities. This is important for understanding the role of culture in the history of the nation, the development of a sense of patriotism, national unity, and modern identity features.

Once Ukraine enters the post-war period of reconstruction, it will be necessary to pay due attention to conducting new and thorough scientific research on folk culture, as well as to attract the attention of European researchers who support our country today. After all, the need to preserve intangible cultural heritage as the structural basis of national culture and cultural identity is one of the most pressing problems of modern civilisation.

A number of UNESCO member states opposed holding a session in Kazan in June 2022, which was planned by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee just as Russia waged a full-scale war against Ukraine. The position of Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications and support for an independent Ukrainian state in the world were important. But this is only one of the first steps to prevent the aggressor country from entering the international cultural space, since the issues of participation in many international events and projects remain open. UNESCO, as an international organisation, must contribute to the protection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage, prevent the destruction of civilisational foundations, and form a unified cultural policy.

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