

The Bureau of the Congress

CG-BUR(2024)60-51¹
5 September 2024

Preliminary Draft Congress Declaration on the destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine

Action required: for decision

¹ This document is classified as confidential until it has been examined by the Bureau of the Congress.

1. Referring to its Declaration 5 (2022) “The Russian Federation’s war against Ukraine”, Declaration 6 (2023) “The anniversary of Russia’s war against Ukraine” and Declaration 8 (2024) “The second anniversary of the Russian Federation’s war against Ukraine”, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (“the Congress”) reiterates its condemnation, in the strongest terms, of the ongoing war of aggression being waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, in breach of international law and the Statute of the Council of Europe. It reaffirms its unwavering commitment to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders.
2. The Congress deplores and condemns once again the fact that this unjustified and unprovoked war against Ukraine continues to cause massive losses of innocent lives and human suffering as well as targeted destruction of vital infrastructures, which represent human rights violations unprecedented in recent history in Europe. Millions of people, the majority of whom are children, continue to be displaced from their homes. Furthermore, thousands of Ukrainians are still in captivity and subject to violence, inhuman treatment and torture.
3. For more than two and a half years, Ukrainians have been courageously defending their country’s freedom in the face of the Russian Federation’s ruthless full-scale aggression. The Congress welcomes the fact that local and regional authorities are playing a central role in Ukraine’s resilience, ensuring the functioning of public services and addressing emergency needs.
4. The Congress deplores the fact that in violation of international humanitarian law, and in particular of the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954 Hague Convention) and its two Protocols, and in spite of numerous calls on it by UNESCO to respect Ukraine’s cultural heritage, the Russian Federation has continually attacked cultural heritage sites in Ukraine. More than a thousand cultural sites have been damaged or destroyed since the beginning of the war, such as the historic centres of Odesa and Lviv, both included in the UNESCO World Heritage list.
5. The Congress underlines that the targeting and looting of cultural sites appear to reflect a systematic policy aiming at erasing Ukraine’s historical and cultural identity, consistent with a genocidal intent.
6. It further emphasises that in addition to reparation for lives lost, injuries and damage to property and infrastructure, the Russian Federation must pay reparations for damage to historical, cultural and religious heritage; in this context, the Ukrainian local and regional authorities have an important role to play in promoting the work of the Register of Damage and in submitting claims to the Register within the scope of their competencies.
7. The Congress underlines that in addition to the need to continue to support Ukraine in its efforts to defend itself from the Russian Federation’s war of aggression as well as Ukrainian citizens forced to flee the country, it is time to put Ukrainian cultural heritage and its recovery high on the political agenda, including at the 2025 Ukraine Recovery Conference to be held in Rome.
8. With reference to the European Cultural Convention (ETS No. 18), ratified by all Council of Europe member States, the Congress emphasises that safeguarding cultural heritage helps connect the past to the future through a shared sense of identity. As such, the European cultural heritage is intrinsically linked to human rights. It further draws attention to the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (CETS No. 199, Faro Convention), and to the Council of Europe Convention on Offences to Cultural Property (CETS No. 221, Nicosia Convention), which aims to prevent and combat illicit trafficking and destruction of cultural property.
9. In the light of the foregoing, the Congress calls on Council of Europe member States to sign and ratify the Faro and Nicosia Conventions, if they have not already done so, to raise awareness about stolen and looted Ukrainian cultural assets, including from Crimea, and to step up efforts to return them to Ukraine.

10. The Congress also calls on local and regional authorities throughout Europe to step up their efforts to help Ukraine in this field and to set up genuine cultural heritage partnerships, bearing in mind that such partnerships can address not only the current need for response measures including for the restoration and urgent protection of cultural heritage, but also damage and risk assessments, including documenting, digitising, securing and stabilising both tangible and intangible heritage. The Congress moreover highlights that cultural heritage partnerships can also support plans for recovery, which should encompass tangible and intangible cultural heritage, be people-centred and place sensitive in the spirit of the Faro Convention.
11. It furthermore encourages local and regional authorities to participate actively in the Council of Europe Cultural Routes of which Ukraine has been a member since 2021, and which helps to promote cultural tourism and development based on a shared cultural heritage route.
12. Finally, it draws the attention of national, regional and local authorities of Council of Europe member States to the fact that, in addition to missiles, the Russian Federation is engaged in a propaganda war and continues to spread fake news and hate speech. It emphasises that more awareness and preventive measures, as well as counter measures, are needed to combat these threats at every level.
13. The Congress will play its part in supporting local and regional authorities in Ukraine to contribute, within their competencies, to the work of the Register of Damages, and in encouraging local and regional authorities throughout the continent to push their national authorities to ratify both the Faro and Nicosia Conventions.
14. The Congress stands by the Ukrainian people and reaffirms its commitment to a common, democratic future and future based on respect for international law and a just peace.