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Geopolitics, Heritage Diplomacy and Nation Building—Russia and Ukraine in the World Heritage Committee before the Full-fledged War

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Abstract: Wars are no longer fought only on the battlefield. The information and media space and the various arenas of symbolic politics are often just as important as the sites of physical combat. In addition to their armed forces, the states involved in the conflict also measure their strength in soft power, mobilizing money and diplomatic lobbying power to gain the upper hand over the other in symbolic politics and in winning over the global audience. In the Russian-Ukrainian war, both sides are trying to make the most of the opportunities offered by symbolic politics to appeal to global public opinion. One of the arenas for this is the World Heritage Committee. The aim of this article is to examine the strategies pursued by Russia and Ukraine in the World Heritage Committee since the beginning of full-scale Russian aggression—2014—examining the strategies pursued by Russia and Ukraine in the World Heritage Committee to achieve their symbolic goals, the extent to which they have been successful, and the extent to which these successes are related to the general balance of power within UNESCO. Overall, it appears that both sides have achieved successes, but—thanks to the support of the Global South—Russia is better able to use the system to achieve its own goals than Ukraine. At the same time, Ukraine has also achieved important successes in addressing global public opinion, and its World Heritage nominations contribute greatly to the construction of a new Ukrainian national identity.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, World Heritage, diplomacy, memory politics, heritage in conflict zones, nation building

Introduction

The World Heritage program has become the most successful undertaking of the entire UN ecosystem in the last 50 years. Its popularity far exceeds all other programs of all other specialized UN agencies, and UNESCO is practically identified with it in public discourse. It is omnipresent and globally recognized.[1] Although at the time of its creation it was estimated 100 sites would qualify for it, at the time of writing, the World Heritage Convention already has 196 State Parties—more than the United Nations—170 of these have a total of 1,248 sites, which receive billions of visitors annually and generate tens of billions of dollars in revenue. The committee sessions attract considerable media attention, and the inscription of

[1] Christoph Brumann, *The Best We Share: Nation, Culture and World-Making in the UNESCO World Heritage Arena* (Berghahn Books, 2021).

a given site means a significant increase in prestige. Thus, international soft power conflicts are increasingly infiltrating the World Heritage arena. States in conflict use the inscriptions to gain media attention, occupy symbolic spaces, and shape their national identity. On the other hand, as a World Heritage title inevitably generates significant media attention and lends greater recognition to the site, states in conflict often feel that WH status provides increased protection for their precious monuments, and since cultural genocide is generally condemned by the global public, WH status can also be a serious deterrent to their opponents. Thus, it is worth analyzing the activities within and around the Committee and the nomination process when mapping a given conflict. In this article, we seek to answer the question of how far the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has reached the World Heritage Committee, what strategies the parties involved have pursued in their World Heritage policies in committee debates and nominations, and how they have changed their goals at different stages of the conflict. Our sources include extensive documentation from World Heritage Committee meetings, materials from the Russian and Ukrainian national UNESCO and ICOMOS committees, and local and global press coverage. The analysis focuses on the texts—nomination documents and resolutions of national and international heritage institutions—that define the narratives surrounding the sites; These documentations are subjected to discourse analysis, to uncover the underlying metanarratives, political intentions. The roles and activities of the various actors—national and international institutions are also analyzed. From all this, we can draw conclusions assessing the changing national strategies.

This article does not aim to provide a detailed analysis of Ukrainian or Russian memory discourse, but it is worth emphasizing that since 2014—and especially since February 2022—the conflict has been raging intensely in the symbolic sphere as well. On the Ukrainian side, symbolic spaces are being created in line with the new national metanarrative, shaping a new Ukrainian national identity—liberating the space considered Ukrainian from all memories of the imperial and Soviet past and reinterpreting the stories of these places in the context of a unified "European Ukraine," which naturally also has an impact on the construction of narratives around new WH and tentative list sites. On the Russian side, the elimination of Ukrainian identity and the recreation of the imperial-Soviet space is taking place in the occupied Ukrainian territories together with the transformation of collective memory in line with the narrative of an anti-Western political course, which also affects the interpretation of heritage sites. The aim of this policy is to emphasize the unity of the two peoples and the Russian character of the occupied Ukrainian territories. These symbolic struggles also infiltrate the diplomatic efforts in and around the World Heritage Committee—which is the subject of this article.

The background—before 2014

The Soviet Union joined the World Heritage Convention relatively late, in 1988. Geering[2] sees the reason for this primarily in Soviet reservations about the World Heritage system as a "Western imperialist" phenomenon. Thus, it was only in 1989 that the nomination of Soviet sites and the compilation of the tentative list began. The aim of this—and the underlying late Soviet heritage policy—was to express the unity of the Union. The list shows that the Soviet Union's historically diverse and unconnected historical traditions, from the Baltic to Central Asia, were presented as unified, while also expressing the primacy of resurgent Russian nationalism.[3] This is how the sites were selected that were added to the World Heritage List in 1990 during the Soviet Union's first—and last—round of nominations: three Russian sites (Leningrad and the surrounding former tsarist residences, Moscow's Red Square, Kizhi), one Ukrainian (St. Sophia Cathedral, Kyiv) and one Central Asian (Khiva). Thus, Ukraine, which was soon to become independent, inherited not only World Heritage membership from the Soviet era—the Ukrainian SSR was an "independent" UN member state—but also a "ready-made" World Heritage site.

In the case of Ukraine—as in the case of other former socialist countries—a detailed analysis of world heritage policy is still pending. However, it is evident that in the 1990s, amid economic decline and political difficulties, independent heritage policy was not a priority, and funding was poor in the freshly formed states. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1998, Lviv became the first site in Ukraine to be nominated by the independent country. The nomination was already initiated in the late 80s by the Ministry of Culture of the Ukrainian SSR, but for independent Ukraine, the inclusion of the city on the World Heritage List, considered the center of Ukrainian national awakening, had a symbolic meaning. Two important elements of the documentation are worth mentioning that foreshadow the direction of later developments: on the one hand, the direct connection with Kievan Rus as the prototype of Ukrainian statehood, and on the other hand, the emphasis on various Western influences and connections.[4] In 2001, Ukraine made an attempt to inscribe four natural sites at once, which ended in complete failure. All four were rejected, and the IUCN's assessment[5] suggests

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2 Corinne Geering, *Building a Common Past: World Heritage in Russia under Transformation, 1965–2000,* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019.

3 Nelly Bekus and Kate Cowcher, "Socialism, Heritage and Internationalism after 1945: The Second World and Beyond," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26, no. 12 (2020): 1123–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1852299.

4 UNESCO World Heritage Centre, L'viv—The Ensemble of the Historic Centre: World Heritage List Nomination (1997), https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/865.pdf (accessed January 30, 2026).

5 *International Union for Conservation of Nature* (IUCN), Evaluation of Nominations of Natural and Mixed Properties to the World Heritage List (2001), 56, https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2001/whc-01-conf208-inf12e.pdf (accessed January 30, 2026).

that international advisory bodies were not involved in the nomination process at all, not even in the selection of potential World Heritage sites. The IUCN's negative assessment was apparently so clear that the re-nomination of the four sites was not even considered, and all four were removed from the tentative list that same year. After that, Ukraine was included in two larger multinational nominations—the Struve Geodetic Arc (2005) and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians (2007)—but did not have any independent nominations. In this respect, Ukraine did not differ from most of the newly independent former Soviet republics. Although all of them had joined the World Heritage Convention and most had successful nominations, their activity was not high during this period. In most cases, either the capital or the cultural center of the country was nominated as the first candidate.

Several authors (Myshlovkska[6] Malysh[7]) analyzed how the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 transformed the memory discourse in Ukraine, how the demand for "decommunisation" and "derussification" of Ukrainian heritage grew. Budgetary analysis clearly shows that the financing of heritage protection grew significantly during the Yushchenko administration. Then, in 2015–16, after the annexation of Crimea, there was another considerable increase in spending on "decommunization" and "derussification." During the same period, several EU cooperation programs were launched, reinforcing the increasingly prominent "European Ukraine" metanarrative. And that had an impact on WH policies too. In the 2010s with the resumption of national-symbolic nominations in the Ukrainian heartland of western Ukraine (Palaces of the Metropolitans of Dalmatia and Bukovina in 2011, Wooden Tserkvas in the Carpathian Region in 2013), and with the emergence of tourism-driven World Heritage nominations (Tauric Chersonese in 2013), attempts were made to redefine Ukrainian World Heritage policy. The compilation of an updated tentative list also reflected this endeavor, as it included sites in western Ukraine associated with the Ukrainian national revival (Tomb of Taras Shecchenko, Kamenets-Podilsk), meanwhile the outlines of a future Crimean World Heritage hub emerged, complementing the existing Crimean nomination with the cave cities of Crimean Gothia and the Khans' Palace in Bakhchisaray, and—possibly—with Askaniya Nova a little further away. The framing of Chersonese and the other Crimean nominations clearly fits into the narrative of "European Ukraine", emphasizing the presence of Western (Greek, Gothic, Italian) elements in Eastern Europe, as stated in the definition of the outstanding universal value of Tauric Chersonese, which "provides outstanding physical evidence of cultural

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6 Oksana Myshlovska, "Delegitimising the Communist Past and Building a New Sense of Community: The Politics of Transitional Justice and Memory in Ukraine," *International Journal for History,* Culture and Modernity 7, no. 1 (2019): 372–405, https://doi.org/10.18352/hcm.561.

7 Nataliia Malysh, Viktoriya Shevchenko, and Olena Tkachuk-Miroshnychenko, "State Policy in the Sphere of Protection of Cultural Heritage in Ukraine," *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-03-2020-0047.

exchange between the Greek, Roman and Byzantine empires and the peoples living on the northern coast of the Black Sea."[8] These nominations depict the region as if it were throughout its entire history some sort of "western bulwark" of Eastern Europe—like a precursor of the current Ukrainian state. However, in the first decades of the new millennium compared to its population and territory, Ukraine still ranked among the lowest in Europe in terms of World Heritage activity, indicating that the sector was not only underfunded and poorly paid, but also the lack of priority for the government.[9]

Although Russia's World Heritage activities experienced a certain setback by the economic downturn and political turmoil of the 1990s, nominations there never completely stopped. New sites were regularly added A significant proportion of these nominations involved elevating outstanding elements of the local cultural register to the global level, as was the case in other countries of the disintegrated union. This is how the monuments of Novgorod, Vladimir and Suzdal, as well as the Solovetsky Islands (1992), Sergiev Posad (1993), and the Church of the Ascension in Kolomenskoye (1994) were nominated. In the second half of the decade, natural sites in the non-European part of the country occurred on the list,[10] which on the one hand indicates that the central government sought to serve the demands for self-representation of the regional elites, and on the other hand, according to Plets's interpretation,[11] by emphasizing nature over cultural elements in the indigenous (non-Russian) territories of the country, they also served Russian ethno-nationalism. This is how the *Virgin Komi Forests* (1995), the *Volcanoes of Kamchatka and Lake Baikal* (1996), the *Golden Mountains of Altai* (1998), and the *Western Caucasus* (1999) ended up on the list. The nomination of the Kazan Kremlin in 2000 brought about a change: influential local elites were now able to successfully get their own cultural heritage sites included in the federal and then global registers. The leadership

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8 UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and Its Chora," https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1411/ (accessed January 30, 2026).

9 Тамара Марусик, "Об'єкти Всесвітньої спадщини ЮНЕСКО як елемент іміджевої складової України," Історико-політичні проблеми сучасного світу, no. 46 (2022): 79–89; К. Д. Іорданова, "Проблеми та перспективи розвитку Всесвітньої спадщини ЮНЕСКО в Україні," in Матеріали І Всеукраїнської конференції (2023), https://ir.nmu.org.ua/handle/123456789/165322.
K. D. Iordanova and O. A. Patsybina, *Problems and prospects for the development of UNESCO World Heritage Ukraine,* 2023.

10 Jørgen Jørgensen and Geir Hønneland, "Implementing Global Nature Protection Agreements in Russia," Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy 9 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1080/13880290500341974.

11 Gertjan Plets, "Heritage Statecraft: Transcending Methodological Nationalism in the Russian Federation," in The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945 (Springer, 2018); Gertjan Plets and Linda van der Pol, "World Heritage and Cultural Statecraft in Putin's Russia: Patriotic Agendas, Flexible Power Relations, and Geopolitical Ambitions," *Change Over Time* 11, no. 2 (2022): 200–224.
Gertjan Plets and Linda Van Der Pol, "World Heritage and Cultural Statecraft in Putin's Russia: Patriotic Agendas, Flexible Power Relations, and Geopolitical Ambitions," *Change Over Time* 11, no. 2 (2022): 200–224.

of Tatarstan proved to be exceptionally ambitious and successful in this regard.[12] However, all these changes had little impact on Russia's relationship with UNESCO in general, which in the 1990s did not differ much from that of other post-Soviet states. After the fall of the Soviet Union, new relationships were established at the institutional level, and states sought to adopt the good practices of West, with Russia also striving to accept and apply the global standards of heritage preservation.[13]

Since the beginning of the new millennium, with the consolidation of Putin's power, cultural heritage has once again become a key instrument of foreign policy and Russian geostrategy, as it was during the Brezhnev era. The first sign of this was that in 2002 when the UNESCO office in Moscow was given regional responsibilities covering the CIS countries. In 2006, IFESCCO was established to perform tasks similar to those of UNESCO in the post-Soviet region, which at that time already did not include Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic states. As Russia's global political ambitions grew stronger, World Heritage representation became increasingly important for the Russian leadership as part of a "soft power" offensive aimed at presenting the "new Russia" as an unavoidable cultural force.[14] In this context, Vestnik UNESCO, the representative publication of the Russian UNESCO Committee, was relaunched in 2004.[15] In addition to presenting Russian culture to Western audiences in line with the government narrative, it has since published a special issue on each WH nomination, showcasing the narratives around each new site. The publication also indicates, as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov confirmed in his welcoming speech, that Russia wants to become a decisive factor within UNESCO by participating in its programs and determining the organization's agenda.[16] However, increasing Russian influence was not the final goal—the Russian government's aim is to establish itself as an independent civilization and, in opposition to the former Western dominance, to create a multipolar system in which it is one of the poles where Western expectations and rules are not considered universally valid.[17]

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12 K. E. Graney, Of Khans and Kremlins: Tatarstan and the Future of Ethno-Federalism in Russia (Lexington Books, 2009), https://books.google.hu/books?id=7ydo7Idyqj0C.

13 Gertjan Plets, "Post-Soviet Heritages in the Making," International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity 7 (2019), https://doi.org/10.18352/hcm.600.

14 A. N. Alekseyeva, "Sochi 2014 and the Rhetoric of a New Russia: Image Construction through Mega-Events," *East European Politics* 30 (2014): 158–74.

15 Russian Commission for UNESCO, Vestnik UNESCO, https://unesco.ru/en/ (accessed January 30, 2026). [Publication-specific details require verification.]

16 Russian Commission for UNESCO, "Sergey Lavrov Summarises Russia's Participation in UNESCO Activities at a Meeting of the National Commission," https://unesco.ru/en/news/01012026003/ (accessed January 30, 2026).

17 Plets and van der Pol, "World Heritage and Cultural Statecraft," 209.

Russian cultural diplomacy saw UNESCO as a suitable arena for creating this anti-Western pole because, in the second decade of the 2000s, significant tensions arose within the organization between northern and southern member states, as well as between member states and advisory bodies.[18] In his book on the history of World Heritage Committee meetings, Brumann refers to what happened in the Committee after 2010 as a "southern revolt,"[19] while others, from a different perspective, describe it as "politicization" of the Committee's decisions. This was primarily manifested when the Committee increasingly opposed the advisory bodies and the World Heritage Centre, inscribing sites that were advised for deferral/referral/non-inscription, and in one case, rejecting on a political basis a nomination that the advisory bodies would have considered worthy of World Heritage status.[20] According to Meskell and Bertacchini's analysis,[21] lobby groups had already formed at the beginning of the decade that systematically helped each other's nominations and pushed decisions through the Committee against the advisory bodies' recommendations. One such important pressure group and supporter of the "southern revolt" was the BRICS, which had been coordinating its activities in the Committee since 2010.[22] In addition to coordinated nominations, BRICS cooperation was also expressed in steps such as the 2013 deal on Jerusalem, which was brokered by Russia and Brazil.[23] These geopolitical changes in the Committee were also helped by the spread of the anthropological concept of heritage, which, at least at the level of declarations, prompted the Secretariat and the leadership of UNESCO to give space to the demands of the South, accepting them as legitimate and taking on the accusation of Eurocentrism.[24] By the middle of the decade, the conflict had reached the

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18 Lynn Meskell, "The Rush to Inscribe: Reflections on the 35th Session of the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO Paris, 2011," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 37, no. 2 (2012): 145–51.

19 Brumann, Best We Share, 224–57.

20 Tamás Szűcs, "Anatomy of a Failure in Heritage Diplomacy: The Tel Dan Case before the World Heritage Committee" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.).

21 Lynn Meskell, "States of Conservation: Protection, Politics, and Pacting within UNESCO's World Heritage Committee," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2014): 217–43; Enrico Bertacchini, Claudia Liuzza, and Lynn Meskell, "Shifting the Balance of Power in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee: An Empirical Assessment," International Journal of Cultural Policy 23, no. 3 (2017): 331–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1048243.
Enrico Bertacchini et al., "Shifting the balance of power in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee: an empirical assessment", *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23, no. 3 (2017): 331–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1048243.

22 Ida Breckan Claudi, "The New Kids on the Block: BRICs in the World Heritage Committee" (master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2011), https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/13149.

23 Tamás Szűcs, "The Jerusalem Question, UNESCO and Global Heritage Policy 1968–1999," *Acta Universitatis de Carolo Eszterházy Nominatae, Sectio Historiae* 48 (2021): 69–90.

24 Christoph Brumann, "Anthropological Utopia, Closet Eurocentrism, and Culture Chaos in the UNESCO World Heritage Arena," Anthropological Quarterly 91, no. 4 (2018): 1203–33.

point where, according to Francesco Bandarin, then Vice-President of the World Heritage Centre, the functioning of the advisory bodies had become completely meaningless.[25]

For Russia, the alliance with the Global South proved useful when it sought to gain support for its own allies—particularly Syria[26]—in the Committee, or when it sought to have its own sites added to the list. ICOMOS -the advisory body evaluating cultural sites - has given a negative assessment of Russia's changing heritage protection. Plets and Cecil show how restoration practices in Russia, which had previously followed Western norms, have been replaced by a practice that can be considered more of a reconstruction, focusing on monumentality and attractiveness rather than authenticity. This search for monumentality fits in perfectly with Putin's political program emphasizing "Russian greatness."[27] At that time, Russian heritage protection justified these characteristics of restoration with "local cultural patterns," rejecting "Eurocentric" and "imperialist-colonialist" criticisms. The emphasis on the "non-Western" nature of Russian heritage protection is fully consistent with the broader state policy in which Russia is presented not as part of West, but as its antithesis. However, this contradicts the fact that most of the buildings that were placed under protection were built in the 16th 19th centuries, when Russia considered itself part of the European cultural sphere, and the buildings themselves—in terms of their materials and character—are much closer to European architecture than to those clearly defined as "non-Western" in the Nara Document.[28] However, alongside this kind of open opposition, Russian heritage diplomacy also sought to persuade the Committee members and engage in intensive lobbying. The most powerful—and by far the most expensive—tool for this was hosting the committee meeting, as organizing countries always have priority in inscriptions, data shows.[29]

The tension between the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS and Russia in the years preceding the escalation of the Russian Ukrainian conflict was primarily evident in the nomination of Bolgar and Sviyazhsk, which Plets[30] analyses in detail. Bolgar was first nominated

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25 Francesco Bandarin, interview by Christina Cameron and Mechtild Rössler, June 20–22, 2014, Doha, Qatar, Oral Archives of the World Heritage Convention, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, https://whc.unesco.org/en/oralarchives/francesco-bandarin/.

26 Lynn Meskell and Claudia Liuzza, "The World Is Not Enough: New Diplomacy and Dilemmas for the World Heritage Convention at 50," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 29, no. 4 (2022): 391–407, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0940739122000030.

27 Plets and van der Pol, "World Heritage and Cultural Statecraft."

28 Tim Winter, "Beyond Eurocentrism? Heritage Conservation and the Politics of Difference," International Journal of Heritage Studies 20, no. 2 (2014): 123–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.736403.

29 Enrico E. Bertacchini and Donatella Saccone, "Toward a Political Economy of World Heritage," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 36, no. 4 (2012): 327–52.

30 Gertjan Plets, "Ethno-Nationalism, Asymmetric Federalism and Soviet Perceptions of the Past: (World) Heritage Activism in the Russian Federation," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 15 (2015): 67–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605314555601.

by Russia in 2000, together with the Kazan Kremlin. At that time, the World Heritage Committee rejected the dossier, primarily because of the dubious reconstruction of the Great Minaret. Russia tried again in 2001, but the result was the same. By 2011, a new dossier had been prepared, which no longer emphasized the architectural uniqueness of the site, but rather its importance within Russian Islam as a cultural landscape. In addition to downplaying the lack of authenticity in the renovation, this also had political benefits, as Russia, as in the Brezhnev era, was seeking partners among the countries of the Global South by promoting domestic Muslim minorities and Islam in general as a part of Russian culture.[31] In 2012, in order to gain more support for the nomination, the Committee session held in St. Petersburg was invited to visit Kazan for the UNESCO Youth Days. Then the site was scheduled to be inscribed in 2013. In the autumn of 2012, President Putin himself visited Bolgar, signaling the importance of the project. Also in the autumn of 2012, an ICOMOS delegation arrived to evaluate the site—they ultimately recommended that the World Heritage Committee reject the nomination. This was followed by a long debate at the World Heritage Committee session. Only the representative of Estonia argued in favor of the ICOMOS recommendation not to inscribe the site. The Indian delegation strongly criticized ICOMOS, accusing it of being biased, while several other southern delegations—Iraq, Qatar, South Africa, Mexico and Algeria—argued in favor of inscription, citing the importance of Islam as an "underrepresented" element. The Emirati delegate admitted that "it may not meet the criteria, but its spiritual significance must be recognized." The Mexican delegate cited the Nara Declaration, which relativized the importance of authenticity. The representative of Serbia also spoke in favor, while the French delegate urged a consensual decision. Finally, as it is not customary to add a site to the list immediately after a rejection proposal, a one-year referral was agreed upon.[32] In 2014, several delegates, mainly from the Global South, jointly proposed the inscription of the site.[33] The representatives of Poland and Germany raised objections, with the latter stating that the Committee was giving Bolgar "exceptional treatment," but the vote was in favor of inclusion.[34] At the same time, Russia withdrew its nomination of Sviyazhsk for revision—originally intended for 2014—which was added to the list in 2017. This site is also located in Tatarstan, and the problems with it were similar to those raised by ICOMOS in the case of Bolgar—according

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31 Ekaterina Braginskaia, "'Domestication' or Representation? Russia and the Institutionalisation of Islam in Comparative Perspective," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (2012): 597–620.

32 UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Report of the Decisions Adopted by the World Heritage Committee at Its 37th Session (Phnom Penh, June 16–27, 2013), 152.

33 The states named in the original text are Lebanon, Portugal, the Philippines, Kazakhstan, Japan, Qatar, India, Jamaica, Finland, Algeria, Croatia, Serbia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Turkey.

34 UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Report of the Decisions Adopted by the World Heritage Committee at Its 38th Session (Doha, June 15–25, 2014).]

to an independent Russian assessment, a "Potemkin village" had been built on the island. For similar reasons, the inclusion of Pskov was postponed from 2017 to 2019.

The voting patterns in 2013–14 clearly show the significant role that geopolitical fault lines played in the decisions of the World Heritage Committee and the extent to which Russia could count on the coordinated votes of the Global South. This not only shows that Russia has succeeded in fully establishing itself as a leader for the Global South—building on the traditions of the Brezhnev era and the anti-Western stance dubbed as "anti-imperialism"—but also that it has successfully marginalized those positions within the World Heritage Committee in the 2010s that question the Russian approach. This indirectly prevented the post-Soviet states from framing their own struggles as "anti-imperialist" or "anti-colonialist."[35] Until the full-fledged war, this seemed secondary from Ukraine's point of view, given Ukraine's low performance in the field of world heritage. However, after 2014, it became essential for the post-Soviet region to recognize Russian aggression, including its cultural implications, as an imperialist colonial war.

The pre-war phase of the conflict 2014–22

The conflict reached the World Heritage Committee in its early stages, immediately after the events of 2014. The strategic goals of the two sides were already clear during this period. Ukraine's primary goal was to symbolically punish Russia by having the international community condemn its aggression, while Russian cultural diplomacy aimed to block these steps, seeking to maintain its influence among the countries of the Global South by interpreting the representation of its own interests as anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist activity.[36]

Ukraine has achieved some minor successes, but Russia has avoided more significant condemnatory actions, even "naming and shaming." UNESCO, as a specialized agency of the United Nations, did not recognize the annexation of Crimea, and since 2014, statements on Crimea have regularly included the issue of sites under Russian occupation. Formally, the first step was taken in 2014 when the ICOMOS General Assembly, at the request of the Ukrainian National Committee of ICOMOS, adopted a resolution condemning the occupation. Between 2016 and the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the UNESCO Executive Board addressed the issue of the occupied Crimea on 12 occasions. The wording of the

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35 David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28.

36 Christoph Brumann, "Slag Heaps and Time Lags: Undermining Southern Solidarity in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee," *Ethnos* 84, no. 4 (2019): 719–38.

resolutions follows the UN principle of the inviolability of borders, referring to the peninsula as the "Autonomous Republic of Crimea" and clearly considering the Ukrainian authorities to be the "responsible authorities," while referring to the Russians as the "occupying power." Compared to the 2016 resolution,[37] which referred exclusively to the Ukrainian side and did not express its own opinion, the wording became more decisive in 2021, with the resolution clearly condemning Russian violations.[38]

This is largely due to the Ukrainian side's more serious efforts. On the one hand, Ukraine has begun to use more proactively the opportunities offered by international law to protect its cultural heritage.[39] The greatest success in this regard was the 2016 decision by a Dutch court ruling that the artifacts loaned by the Russian Crimean Peninsula prior to its annexation must be returned to the Ukrainian authorities in Kyiv. The Dutch court's decision was based on the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which the Netherlands, Russia, and Ukraine all signed and ratified in 2009, 1988, and 1988, respectively.[40] Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture has successfully brought the issue of the Aivazovsky exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow to the attention of the international community. The exhibition featured several paintings that had been removed from the Aivazovsky Museum in Fedosia—a move that, according to Ukraine, constitutes a violation of international law.[41] In January 2018, the Ukrainian National Commission for UNESCO convened a meeting with Ukrainian state bodies with the aim of emphasizing the issue of cultural heritage in communications related to Crimea. This resulted in an action plan that included traditional tools of cultural diplomacy, such as consultations with UNESCO leaders and various programs in Paris aimed at presenting Ukraine's position on Crimea, particularly with regard to the Khan's Palace in Bakhchisaray, to the bureaucracy of international organizations.[42] On the other hand, the Ukrainian cabinet

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37 UNESCO Executive Board, Summary Records, 200 EX/5, 43–44.

38 UNESCO Executive Board, "Follow-Up to Decisions and Resolutions Adopted by the Executive Board and the General Conference at Their Previous Sessions," part I, "Programme Issues," section E, "Follow-Up of the Situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Ukraine)."

39 Nour A. Munawar and James Symonds, "Empires of Lies? The Political Uses of Cultural Heritage in War," in *War and the Historic Environment* (Routledge, 2024).

40 Evelien Campfens, "Who's Cultural Heritage? Crimean Treasures at the Crossroads of Politics, Law and Ethics," *Art, Antiquity and Law* 22 (2017): 193.

41 Sophia Kishkovsky, "Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery under Fire over Crimean Loans in Blockbuster Show," *The Art Newspaper,* August 19, 2016.

42 "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage as an Instrument for the Protection of Monuments in the Occupied Crimea," *Voice of Crimea,* 2020, https://culture.voicecrimea.com.ua/en/convention-concerning-the-protection-of-the-world-cultural-and-natural-heritage-as-an-instrument-for-the-protection-of-monuments-in-the-occupied-crimea/ (accessed January 30, 2026). "Send a letter to the Director-General of UNESCO regarding the state of preservation of Ukraine's cultural heritage as a result

then began more active legislative work to sanction measures related to cultural heritage in Crimea that are illegal under international law.[43]

As regards the World Heritage Site (Tauric Chersonese)[44] and the sites on the tentative list (namely Bakhchisaray and Sudak), the problems/grievances raised by the Ukrainian side were similar to those raised by the Palestinians in the case of the similarly occupied and disputed city of Jerusalem: Expropriation by the occupying power (in this case, the inclusion of the sites in the Russian register of monuments), excavations that are illegal under international law (Chersonese), construction work (the Tavrida highway, which passes through a former Muslim/Tatar cemetery in Kerch), lack of proper maintenance (towers collapsed in Sudak Castle) and inadequate reconstruction work (Bakhchisaray).[45]

However, the contradictory nature of the situation is indicated by the fact that these Ukrainian grievances appear exclusively in the texts compiled by the Secretariat for the Director-

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of large-scale illegal works in the Crimea by the Russian occupation authorities, including on the territory of the Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace "

"To send a note of protest to the Russian Federation regarding the destruction of the Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace as a result of the occupation authorities' so-called "Restoration work", which should be implemented without collegial coordination by virtue of the powers of each specific agency,

"Organize an information event on the protection of cultural heritage in the Crimea, including Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace, at the Embassy of Ukraine in France with the participation of representatives of the UNESCO Secretariat, ICOMOS, ICCROM, permanent delegations of UNESCO member countries, journalists, the public "To hold public hearings and expert consultations," and "To hold consultations in international expert circles on the participation of relevant specialists in the mission (missions) of international monitoring in the Crimea. Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace, at the Embassy of Ukraine in France with the participation of representatives of the UNESCO Secretariat, ICOMOS, ICCROM, permanent delegations of UNESCO member countries, journalists, the public," and "To hold public hearings and expert consultations." "To hold consultations in international expert circles on the participation of relevant specialists in the mission (missions) of international monitoring in the Crimea." Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace, at the Embassy of Ukraine in France with the participation of representatives of the UNESCO Secretariat, ICOMOS, ICCROM, permanent delegations of UNESCO member countries, journalists, the public, "To hold public hearings and expert consultations." "To hold consultations in international expert circles on the participation of relevant specialists in the mission (missions) of international monitoring in the Crimea." Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage as an Instrument for the Protection of Monuments in the Occupied Crimea Paris 2020 https://culture.voicecrimea.com.ua/en/convention-concerning-the-protection-of-the-world-cultural-and-natural-heritage-as-an-instrument-for-the-protection-of-monuments-in-the-occupied-crimea/ (accessed 01.30.2026.)

43 "Sanction Policy of Ukraine and Cultural Heritage of Crimea," *Voice of Crimea,* 2020, https://culture.voicecrimea.com.ua/en/sanction-policy-of-ukraine-and-cultural-heritage-of-crimea/ (accessed January 30, 2026).

44 For discussion of Tauric Chersonese, see Anna Gaynutdinova, Heritage Re-Contextualisation in Post-Soviet Russia (n.d.) [publication details not supplied]; Plets and van der Pol, "World Heritage and Cultural Statecraft." Anna Gaynutdinova, *Heritage re-contextualisation in post-Soviet Russia.*
Plets and Van Der Pol, "World Heritage and Cultural Statecraft in Putin's Russia: Patriotic Agendas, Flexible Power Relations, and Geopolitical Ambitions".

45 The original note distinguishes the 2003 tentative-list spelling "Bagçesaray" from the 2012 cultural-landscape nomination spelling "Bakhchysarai."

General.[46] Within the Executive Board itself, support for the Ukrainian case was much less pronounced. According to the summary records, the fault lines of geopolitics after 2014 were also reflected in UNESCO: the European (Slovak, German, Latvian, EU) delegations emphasized the importance of recognizing Ukrainian sovereignty in the debate and argued in favor of adopting the draft texts. The Russian delegate—joined, as usual, by Venezuela and, after 2017, Hungary—basically attacked Ukraine and the Baltic states on the issue of minority language rights.[47] The delegates from the Global South—when they commented on the issue—only emphasized the importance of compromise. When it came to the vote, most states abstained, and the texts were adopted by only a slight majority—which the Russian Foreign Ministry emphasized in a press release, indicating that the resolution adopted in the Executive Board had in fact represented a minority position.[48]

However, not even this much has happened in the World Heritage Committee. Unlike in the case of Jerusalem, where the decisions of the Executive Board were reflected in the decisions of the World Heritage Committee and the Palestinian complaints were incorporated into the decisions unchanged, only one decision has been made in the case of Ukraine after 2014. In 2016, the case of Tauric Chersonese was brought before the World Heritage Committee.[49] The initiator—again on Ukraine's initiative—was ICOMOS, which would have recommended the "in danger" classification. Although the decision refers to the relevant decisions of the EC, it does not mention the occupation or the damage it has caused, merely "calling on all parties to refrain from taking any action that would result in irreversible changes to the site, to fulfil their obligations under international law and to protect the site by all means." It further stipulates that, as soon as the situation allows, a fact-finding committee should travel to the site. However, the resolution makes no mention of the "in danger" classification proposed by ICOMOS. The

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46 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "UNESCO Enhances the Monitoring of the Situation in the Occupied Crimea," https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/67720-junesko-aktivizuje-monitoring-situaciji-v-okupovanomu-krimu (accessed January 30, 2026).

47 UNESCO Executive Board, Summary Records, 202nd Session (October 4–18, 2017), 13; Summary Records, 205th Session (October 3–17, 2018), 61; Summary Records, 210th Session (December 2, 2020–January 27, 2021), 50; Summary Records, 211th Session (April 7–21, 2021), 30; Summary Records, 212th Session (October 6–20, 2021), 38.
Executive Board 210th session Paris, 2 December 2020–27 January 2021 50.
Executive Board 211th session Paris, 7–21 April 2021 Summary records 30.
Executive Board 212th session Paris, 6–20 October 2021 38.
Executive Board 205th session Paris, 3–17 October 2018. 61.

48 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press Release on UNESCO Considering the Crimea Issue within Its Competence," https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1526313/ (accessed January 30, 2026).

49 UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Decision 40 COM 7B.62, 40th Session (Istanbul, July 10–20, 2016), 75.

state of conservation report was also adopted in the same year, indicating that they had not received adequate information about the site, but there is no mention of occupation. The state of conservation is assessed based on data from 2013, before the occupation.

Ukraine sought to provide even greater protection for Ukrainian heritage in Crimea, submitting the nomination dossier of the Khan's Palace in Bakhchisaray to the World Heritage Committee twice, in 2014 and 2015. However, the World Heritage Centre, which handles nominations, rejected the documentation on both occasions as "incomplete". Although Ukrainian literature also interprets this as that the documentation was "not ready,"[50] only the publication of the archival materials will reveal exactly what the exact objections were – but in all likelihood, they wanted to avoid controversy surrounding the disputed site. The inclusion of Jerusalem and Preah Vihear on the World Heritage List confirms that the World Heritage Committee has the right to include sites of disputed ownership on the list—in the case of Jerusalem, even proposed by a State Party that does not have de facto control over the site—but the rejection of Tel Dan in 2010 and 2011 indicated that even the support of the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS is not enough in the case of a disputed site if there is no appropriate political consensus behind it. The votes on Bolgar in 2013–14 showed that if there is conflict between Russia and the advisory bodies, the majority of the Committee, consisting of southern States Parties, tends to lean towards the Russian opinion. Thus, although it cannot be proven in the absence of archival sources that Russia intervened in any way in the nomination process, the conflict-averse behavior of the Secretariat handling the proposals makes it likely that they took into account in advance that the nomination would not be successful, and the Russian delegation's subsequent efforts in the case of Odesa prove that the Russians had the intention to block Ukrainian nominations.

The Ukrainian failures suffered in the World Heritage system were somewhat compensated in the field of intangible cultural heritage,[51] enabled by the fact that Russia did not sign the UN Convention. Ukraine first added an item to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 (Petrykivka decorative painting), followed by Cossack songs in 2016 and Kosiv ceramics in 2019. The nominations only had clear political connotations from 2021 onwards, when Ukraine successfully nominated Crimean Tatar decorative art for the list.[52]

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50 Elmira Ablialimova-Chyihoz, "The Tools of Modern Russian Colonization: The Case of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace," in *War in Ukraine: Theological, Ethical and Historical Reflections,* ed. Christina Dietl, Khrystyna Fostyak, Thomas Schulte-Umberg, Olha Uhryn, and Noreen van Elk (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2025), 30–43, https://doi.org/10.17438/978-3-402-25102-7.

51 Наталія Терес, "Міжнародна охорона нематеріальної культурної спадщини: світовий та український досвід," *Етнічна історія народів Європи,* no. 36 (2011): 58–63.

52 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, "Ornek, a Crimean Tatar Ornament and Knowledge about It," https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ornek-a-crimean-tatar-ornament-and-knowledge-about-it-01601 (accessed January 30, 2026).

Conclusion

Overall, we can say that the two countries started the conflict from very different positions. While Russia had reestablished itself as a global player in heritage diplomacy since the late 1990s and had global goals with a corresponding network of contacts, Ukraine was virtually invisible in international heritage diplomacy until the start of the open conflict, with its world heritage policy serving more to achieve its own national goals—the building of a European Ukrainian nation. Nevertheless, between 2014 and 2022, Ukraine achieved partial success in winning over the Bureau and the advisory body (ICOMOS), getting several resolutions adopted, but Russia managed to block any condemnatory decisions within the Committee and, through direct or indirect influence, prevented Ukraine from submitting controversial sites. Unlike in similar cases (Jerusalem, Preah Vihear), the Committee did not take an active role in conflict management, not even at the level of "naming and shaming", due to the geopolitical changes in the Committee.

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