

EU-Ukraine Heritage Diplomacy: A Multi-Focus Expert Perception

Jean Monnet Network Challenges and Opportunities of EU
Heritage Diplomacy in Ukraine” (HER-UKR)

Work Package 5 “Strategic Communication”

REPORT 3

PART I



INSIGHTS.
EXPERIENCES.
SOLUTIONS.

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

Ukraine's cultural and historical heritage has gained renewed significance amid the full-scale Russian invasion, serving both as a target of destruction and a symbol of national resilience. This report analyses interviews with 21 key experts in the field of Ukrainian heritage and culture, EU-Ukraine heritage diplomacy, heritage strategic communication, and cultural activism. The experts from the state and non-state sectors shared diverse views on heritage as tangible (e.g. museums, artifacts) and intangible (e.g. traditions, language) assets for Ukraine and its international profile, at times of peace and war.

The analysis highlights the role of heritage in identity formation and geopolitical positioning, contributing to policy and academic discourses on wartime cultural diplomacy.

The report is based on the semi-structured interviews conducted both face-to-face and online in 2025-2026. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian by the team of researchers from the Cherkasy National University (Ukraine) and the University of Canterbury (New Zealand) and translated for this report.

The interviews were conducted following the Human Research Ethics Committee approval issued by the University of Canterbury, New Zealand (HEC Ref: HREC 2025/35). Following the UC HREC protocol, all quotes in this report will remain unattributed.

This report is one of the key deliverables of the Work Package 5 “Strategic Communication” of the Jean Monnet Policy Network “Challenges and Opportunities of EU Heritage Diplomacy in Ukraine” (HER-UKR).



ROOTS: UKRAINIAN HERITAGE AND ITS COMMUNICATORS

HERITAGE AS IDENTITY, RESILIENCE AND LIVING PRACTICE

Experts in our study shared their immediate associations with Ukrainian cultural and historic heritage. Experts across all backgrounds converged on three recurring themes:

- **heritage as the foundation of national identity,**
- **heritage as a site of active resistance under colonial and wartime pressures,**
- **heritage as something living and practiced rather than frozen in museums.**

Several experts noted that Russia's full-scale invasion had not diminished Ukrainians' connection to their heritage but dramatically intensified it – a phenomenon described by some as somewhat unexpected yet revealing about the depth of Ukrainian cultural roots.

The de-colonisation of historical narratives emerged as a consistent subtheme, with participants pointing to Russia's systematic appropriation of Ukrainian cultural figures and traditions as one of the key challenges which needs to be addressed urgently.



“Cultural heritage is not only about physical artefacts and monuments. It is precisely what we are most deeply imbued with – and in the most critical moments, it shines extraordinarily brightly.” (CA5, 2023)

“Our history requires decolonisation and rethinking in its own context, free from imperial narratives.” (CA1, 2023)

“Ukrainian culture as a fortress of identity – its preservation during war is an act of resistance.” (AC2, 2023)

“In times of war, when pressure increases, the desire to preserve one's own identity becomes even more unwavering”. (CA1, 2023)



ENGAGING WITH HERITAGE: INSTITUTIONS, INITIATIVES AND PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

We interviewed experts who represent a wide spectrum of engagement with heritage and diplomacy: they were from parliamentary committees, NGOs, cultural diplomacy organisations, state museums, archives, as well as individual creative practitioners.

Despite this diversity in their backgrounds, a common pattern emerged: since February 2022, all participants have significantly intensified their heritage-related work, pivoting towards **documentation**, **international outreach**, and **counter-narrative production**.

- *Ukraine-based respondents* have focused on preserving physical collections and recording wartime testimony.
- *Members of Ukrainian diaspora and diplomatic community* have shifted their activities towards educating foreign audiences and debunking Russian myths.

Many experts described operating under severe resource constraints, relying on volunteer networks, international grants, and improvised logistics to continue their work.



“From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, it was primarily important to inform the world about events in Ukraine. I went on air daily on a volunteer basis for Spanish-language Radio Marti – from February to September.” (DP2, 2023)

“What kind of people are these who resist such a serious power as the Russian Federation? This contemporary cultural voice of Ukraine speaks through writing, through artistic events, through participation in festivals.” (DP1, 2023)

VOICES, FIGURES, AND NARRATIVES WORTH TELLING

We asked the experts about what *topics and personalities* they engaged with the most when they communicated about Ukraine's heritage internationally. Experts have referenced repeatedly a ***specific set of cultural figures, and particularly those whose legacy was suppressed, appropriated, or destroyed by the Soviet and Russian imperial powers.***

The Executed Renaissance, the Sixtiers generation, Taras Shevchenko, and Mykola Leontovych's *Shchedryk* emerged as the most frequently cited reference points.

A striking pattern was the use of these figures as strategic communication tools: respondents described deploying them to reposition Ukraine on the European cultural map and to challenge the assumption – common among Western audiences – that these names belong to Russian rather than Ukrainian heritage.

Crimean Tatar cultural figures were also in a prominent focus, especially by experts who focus on the indigenous heritage dimensions of the war.



“What I always start with when speaking to an international audience is Anna Yaroslavna, who was Queen of France. We try to explain that our connection with Europe goes back to Kyivan Rus” (CA4, 2023)

“This is the Executed Renaissance – what did not have a chance to sound, had all grounds to be called world-level, but did not sound fully because it was destroyed.” (DP1, 2023)

REALITIES: NARRATIVES IN CONFLICT AND THE GAPS THAT REMAIN



WHAT THE WORLD SEES — AND WHAT IT MISSES

The experts shared their observations of media narratives about Ukrainian heritage communicated to domestic and international audiences. Experts agreed on a clear, but uneven picture:

- *Inside Ukraine*: the dominant media narratives were seen to centre on **heritage under threat, the indestructibility of culture, and national identity as a source of wartime unity.**
- *Internationally*: the picture has been **shaped more by sudden discovery than sustained engagement.** The experts reported how many international audiences encountered Ukrainian cultural heritage for the first time through the war, often surprised to learn that leading cultural figures they had assumed were Russian were, in fact, Ukrainian.

A consistent pattern across responses was the recognition of two co-existing media narratives: (1) **Ukraine as victim of cultural destruction** and (2) **Ukraine as a site of extraordinary, previously overlooked cultural richness.** In the experts' opinion, the latter narrative – Ukraine as a country of powerful, independent cultural heritage – remains underdeveloped in international media, where stories about the war-related

destruction of Ukraine's cultural and historic heritage tends to dominate over stories about Ukraine's cultural depth and continuity. Several respondents identified a shift to a third, more recent narrative: a **growing visibility of contemporary Ukrainian culture** – literature, music, film, etc. The present-day culture is attracting international interest and media attention not only because of the war, but because of its high artistic quality. In the opinion of the experts, this shift in media framing presents a critical opening that international heritage communicators must capitalise on.

“In Europe, until 2014, Ukrainian cultural heritage could be described in three words: Andriy Shevchenko the footballer, Vitaliy Klichko the boxer, and Chornobyl. That was the picture of Ukraine.” (DP1, 2023)

“Europe suddenly discovered that it was not the Russians who had this incredible cultural impulse – something modernised, something new –but the Ukrainians. And there was a serious school of this avant-gardism.” (DP1, 2023)

THE INFORMATION GAP: WHAT IS MISSING AND WHY IT MATTERS



Experts were consistent and emphatic about three **key communication gaps**:

- 1. The lack of context and depth: international coverage remains largely superficial, focusing on destruction rather than the meaning of the cultural loss**

Experts noted how international media tends to be either superficial or excessively dramatised by focusing on destruction without explaining why the heritage being destroyed matters, how it functions in the everyday life of Ukrainians, or what its loss means for Ukrainian identity. This ‘**context deficit**’ was identified as a structural problem: international audiences cannot sustain emotional engagement with the loss if they do not understand what is being lost in the first place.

- 2. Under-representation of Ukraine’s multicultural and indigenous heritage dimensions: Crimean Tatar, minority, and regional traditions remain largely invisible internationally**

Several experts pointed to the near-absence of Crimean Tatar, as well as other minority communities in Ukraine from international coverage. Yet, these are communities whose cultural traditions are challenged by the war and even threatened by the Russian occupation. The inclusion of the Crimean Tatar ornament Ornek in UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage was cited as a model of what effective international recognition can achieve.

- 3. Institutional communication gap: The EU supports Ukrainian heritage, but rarely communicates about this publicly**

The EU and other international donors fund significant heritage work in Ukraine, but systematically fail to publicise this investment and collaboration. This is a missed opportunity for the heritage diplomacy and narrative projection on both sides. For the EU specifically, this is limiting the diplomatic returns on its own investment.

“There is a lack of explanations about why exactly this heritage is important, how it functions in modern life, and what role it plays in shaping societal resilience. Vivid cases are needed – even through the prism of difficult or painful topics.” (CA1, 2023)

“The European Union does a lot in terms of heritage diplomacy. But there is absolutely no popularisation of this activity.” (CA4, 2023)

PUBLIC AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS A TOOL FOR HERITAGE PRESERVATION

Experts agreed that public and cultural diplomacy are indispensable tools to communicate heritage internationally, but only if deployed professionally and strategically. In this case, experts drew a clear distinction between two functions of public and cultural diplomacy:

- (a) as a **means of presenting Ukrainian heritage to foreign publics** through art, exhibitions, concerts, and festivals;
- (b) as a **broader state-to-society communication that shapes international opinion and attracts institutional support.**

Both functions were seen as under-funded and under-coordinated relative to the scale of the challenge.

Experts stressed that cultural diplomacy reaches a much wider audience than may be commonly assumed – not only experts and diplomats, but ordinary citizens who encounter Ukraine through aesthetic experiences. Several experts argued that this **emotional, human-scale dimension of heritage communication is precisely what Ukraine’s international communication strategy should prioritise.** However, it often remains subordinated to crisis messaging about destruction and aid.

Diaspora communities were consistently identified as an under-utilised strategic asset, both as carriers of heritage and multipliers of messages about heritage in their host countries. Experts called for the Embassies of Ukraine to function as umbrella organisations coordinating diaspora heritage activities in closer collaboration with relevant civil society networks.

“Cultural diplomacy has its own unique audience – it is much broader than it may seem at first glance. It is not only experts and diplomats, but primarily ordinary people in other countries who want to learn more about Ukraine. Cultural events speak about Ukraine in the language of emotions, art, and beauty, and turn the abstract word ‘Ukraine’ into a living, understandable, and close story.” (CA1, 2023)

“Public and cultural diplomacy are extremely powerful tools – provided they are used professionally to form a positive image of Ukraine on the international arena.” (DP4, 2023)



RESPONSES: ACTING STRATEGICALLY IN A CHANGING WORLD

NARRATIVES WORTH AMPLIFYING — AND THE AUDIENCES THAT NEED TO HEAR THEM

Experts agreed on what **key narratives related to Ukrainian heritage should be prioritised in communication with international audiences** in a changing geopolitical situation. Three narrative themes were identified as the most urgent:

1. **Ukraine as a bearer of rich and independent heritage**

This narrative stresses the message that Ukraine possesses a powerful, distinct cultural tradition that stands apart from Russia's imperial claims. Experts argued this narrative must be communicated not as a counter-narrative to Russia, but as a positive, affirmative claim grounded in concrete historical and artistic evidence.

2. **Heritage as an act of resistance:**

This narrative forefronts the message that preservation of culture (songs, traditions, crafts, language) and especially under conditions of war and displacement is, in itself, a political act. Experts stressed that authentic human stories of culture-bearers continuing their work despite the war and many challenges seem to carry far greater international resonance than some institutional statements.

3. **Ukraine as part of European and global civilisation:**

This narrative prioritises the message that historical ties connecting Ukrainian heritage to the European culture, from Kyivan Rus to the avant-garde, need sustained, proactive communication. This narrative counters both Russian appropriation and Western ignorance simultaneously.



On the question of **target audiences**, experts identified a clear hierarchy:

- **International institutions and donors** – UNESCO, the EU, the Council of Europe – were seen as the priority, followed by **diplomats and government officials**. Both are capable of embedding heritage issues into international political agenda.
- **International media and cultural platforms** were identified as the key channel for reaching broader publics.
- **Scholars and diaspora communities** were seen as essential multipliers of specialist knowledge.

Several experts noted that the changing political situation – including shifts in US foreign policy and a growing war fatigue in Western public opinion – makes the cultural and civilisational argument for Ukraine's heritage increasingly important as another key theme alongside political and military communications.

“In wartime conditions, it is extremely important that alongside official political statements and statistics on the destruction of cultural heritage, authentic narratives are also heard – narratives that convey the human dimension and depth of losses.” (CA1, 2025)

“Understanding the target audience makes it possible to create narratives that resonate with each group — from politicians to the broad public. This approach allows our narratives to be effective: they reach those who can make decisions, influence policy, support initiatives, or strengthen our visibility on the international level.” (CA1, 2025)



HERITAGE DESTRUCTION AS RUSSIA’S DELIBERATE STRATEGY

Experts were asked whether they agree with the statement made by Ukraine’s former Minister of Culture and Strategic Communications Mykola Tochytskyi in his address to the European Council in 2024: that the destruction of Ukrainian heritage is not collateral damage of war, but Russia’s deliberate and pre-planned strategy. All interviewed experts agreed with it unequivocally. Several experts went further, contextualising this strategy within a centuries-long practice of Russian imperial suppression of Ukrainian cultural identity.

On the question of the most effective communication means for conveying this message to international audiences, experts recommended a **multi-channel communication approach calibrated to different target groups:**

For policy-makers and international institutions: continue reaching through analytical reports in English produced in partnership with international organisations; integrate information and facts about heritage destruction in Ukraine during the war into diplomatic speeches and official submissions to international bodies.

For broad publics: consider reaching through short documentary films and video content with an emotional element on platforms with wide reach: e.g. the ‘before and after’ footage of destroyed sites, eyewitness testimonies, or stories of specific community losses in the field of culture and heritage.

For specialist audiences: consider reaching through academic publications, international conference participation, and scholarly projects drawing parallels between Ukrainian and European cultural developments and counterparts, reinstating Ukrainian heritage within the European cultural canon.

Across all audiences: **the power of the individual human story was consistently emphasised over statistics.** Experts argued that the Boryviter mosaic recreated from Alla Horska’s destroyed Mariupol original – exhibited first in Kyiv, then in London – exemplifies the kind of a culturally resonant event that creates lasting international impact.

“Russia’s deliberate desire to destroy our culture, our heritage – precisely because we have every right to assert that this is European heritage.” (DP5, 2023)

“Implementing the understanding of the destruction of heritage as part of the genocide of the Ukrainian people – this must become a central message.” (DP3, 2023)



WHO SHOULD BE SPEAKING?

KEY COMMUNICATORS OF UKRAINIAN HERITAGE

Experts were consistent in rejecting the idea of a single key communicator in favour of a **coordinated, multi-actor model**. The complexity of the communication challenge – reaching diverse audiences across multiple countries with different cultural contexts – was seen as requiring both state and non-state actors working in concert. Experts identified the following as the most critical actors:

- *State institutions with an international mandate.* The Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ukrainian Institute were identified as essential for providing legitimacy, diplomatic channels, and coordination.
- *National museums, archives, and scientific institutions:* as sources of authoritative evidence, curated narratives, and exhibition capacity.
- *Public and civil society organisations working in cultural diplomacy and heritage preservation:* as sources of established international partnerships.
- *Artists, writers, filmmakers, and representatives of creative industries:* identified as the most powerful translators of complex heritage messages into emotionally accessible and internationally legible forms.
- *International media platforms and journalists with established reputations:* Netflix, BBC, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* as amplifiers with a wide global reach.
- *Diaspora communities and Ukrainian embassies abroad:* embassies were called upon to function as umbrella organisations coordinating diaspora heritage activities

Several experts highlighted a productive tension between internal and external communicators: *Ukraine-based actors* carry the authenticity and immediacy of lived experience, while *diaspora and international interlocutors* often have greater credibility with, and access to, target audiences abroad. Experts called for **deliberate bridge-building between these two groups**.

“Effective strategic communication regarding Ukrainian cultural heritage is possible only through coordinated actions of various actors – both at the national and international levels. Only through joint efforts can we achieve sustainable and large-scale impact.”
 (AC1, 2023)

“We do not want sympathy. We want the world to say: how brave you are, how you stand against such a large country with far greater resources — and you hold.” (CA5, 2025)



HERITAGE AS POWER: UKRAINE'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN A SHIFTING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The final question asked how communicating Ukrainian heritage can contribute to strengthening Ukraine's position in the current, rapidly changing political situation. Experts responded with a shared conviction: **heritage communication is not a soft supplement to political and military strategy, but a core component of it.**

Several identified it as **Ukraine's most durable diplomatic asset** – one that retains its power even when political winds shift.

Experts identified four ways in **which effective heritage communication strengthens Ukraine's international position**:

1. Countering Russian propaganda: by asserting the independence, depth, and European character of Ukrainian culture, heritage communication directly undermines Russia's imperial narrative that Ukraine has no distinct cultural identity separate from Russia.

2. Building long-term international solidarity: audiences who have encountered Ukrainian culture through art, music, literature, or exhibitions develop a personal connection that outlasts political shifts. This creates a more resilient base of international support than a crisis-driven appeals alone.

3. Attracting institutional and financial support: framing heritage preservation as a matter of global cultural responsibility – rather than a national or bilateral concern – broadens the coalition of actors willing to invest in Ukraine's cultural future.



4. Positioning Ukraine as a future European partner: experts consistently argued that demonstrating Ukraine's cultural depth and European rootedness makes the case for Ukraine's EU trajectory more compellingly than political arguments alone. Heritage is, in this sense, a form of soft power with hard political consequences.

Several experts noted that the reparations question – not donations, but political accountability for cultural destruction – must become part of the international heritage diplomacy agenda. As one expert put it, **Ukraine is not seeking charity; it is asserting a right.**

“In a well-developed and planned information strategy, heritage communication should contribute not only to cultural diplomacy but to strengthening Ukraine's overall position in the world – forming the image of a stable, open partner with cultural diversity, which in turn increases the level of trust and support from the international community.” (DP6, 2023)

“Reparations first – because this is about political responsibility, not just money. Then investment, not donations. We are not standing under a church begging.” (CA5, 2025)