



Report of ICOM Ukraine

(May 2024)

On May 24, 2024, during the programming of the Intermuseum Festival in Moscow, the president of ICOM Russia and director of the National Gatchina Palace and Estate Museum Vasilij Pankratov claimed that the “Russian Committee of ICOM functions as a fully-fledged structure of the international organization” and plans collaborations with “national committees of ICOM and cultural institutions abroad.”¹

It is within this context that I would like to draw attention of the museum community to the fact that the Government of Ukraine and Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, primarily the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, are taking comprehensive measures in order to put a stop to illegal activities on the Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation (the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol and parts of the Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts) and to bring to justice the war criminals directly involved in committing illegal acts, including officials of Russian museums.

¹

https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/panelnaya_diskussiya_o_novykh_mekhanizmaxh_mezhdunarodnogo_sotrudnichestva_v_muzeynoy_sfere_proshla

According to the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, approximately 1.7 million objects from the museum heritage of Ukraine have fallen under control of the Russian occupation authorities.

According to the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, as the result of the Russian aggression, 1062 cultural landmarks had been damaged or destroyed, 8 museums on the occupied territories had been plundered, and 42,399 museum objects have been illegally removed, some to museums in the Russian Federation.

Since the beginning of the Russian military aggression in 2014, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies have been investigating a number of criminal cases linked to the removal of Ukrainian museum objects to Russian museums. Cases of this type have been initiated regarding the removal of objects from museums in Crimea and Sevastopol; more recent cases include the plundering of museums in Donbas and the south of Ukraine, including the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore and the Kherson Museum of Fine Arts.

I would like to note especially that since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, the Russian government has been consistently enforcing comprehensive policies that entail recruiting Russian museums and museum experts to justify the military aggression and war crimes and to inculcate the ideological doctrine of the leadership of the Russian regime that includes, among other precepts, the denial of the existence of the Ukrainian nation and the denial of Ukrainians' right to statehood.

Russian museums are directly involved in facilitating and legitimizing the acts that have signs of the crime of genocide.

As a result of this, they will face an extensive legal response, including bringing officials to criminal justice and sanctioning institutions.

The National Committee of ICOM of Ukraine cannot stay away from these efforts after attacks of the Russian army had destroyed multiple museums across the entire Ukrainian territory, from Kharkiv to Lviv. Most tragically, several of our colleagues have been killed, and several Ukrainian museum workers have been wounded or tortured by Russians.

We cannot turn a blind eye to the actions of the Russian museums that run counter to the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums. Ignoring these crimes will ensure that the conflicts will only spread.

The key components of the Russian criminal policies after February 24, 2022, and the role of museums therein, are as follows.

Seizing museum heritage of Ukraine

In the early October of 2022, the Russian authorities have passed a range of illegal decrees regarding the “integration” of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts) into the Russian legal field and government structures, and introduced a “transitional period” until January 1, 2026. Following the decrees, the leadership of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation began to explore the state of Ukrainian museums and their collections.

On March 18, 2023, the **federal law № 63-FZ**, “On Legal Regulation of Relations in Culture in Connection with the Incorporation into the Russian Federation of the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Lugansk People’s Republic, the Zaporozhye Region and the Kherson Region, and the Formation of the New Constituent Entities Within the Russian Federation – the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Lugansk People’s Republic, the Zaporozhye Region and the Kherson Region,” was adopted.²

According to the provisions of the law, Ukrainian museum objects on the occupied territories have to be included in the State Catalogue of the Museum Fund of Russia by December 31, 2027. Therefore, museum heritage is being seized as a matter of state policy. Experts from Russian museums are directly involved in the process.

The Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation has instituted a “**curatorship program**”: according to the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation Olga Lyubimova (sanctioned by EU countries, the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, Switzerland, New Zealand, etc.), 21 Russian museums of the federal subordination (including the State Historical Museum, Peterhof State Museum-Reserve, the Polytechnic Museum, the State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSIZO, the Russian Museum of Ethnography, the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-

² <https://www.pnp.ru/law/2023/03/18/federalnyy-zakon-63-fz.html>

45 (the Victory Museum), among others) have “assumed patronage” over 77 Ukrainian museums on the temporarily occupied territories.

Within the framework of this program, Russian museums extend certain types of professional assistance while ensuring the “integration” of the seized museums into the Russian museum system, fostering ideological indoctrination and distorting the content and messages of the museums.

Legitimizing the war of aggression and war crimes

Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, Russian museums have been consistently initiating and/or joining demonstrations of “solidarity” with the Russian army and supporting the so-called “special military operation.”

As early as on February 26, 2002, the decree of the Ministry of Culture of Russia launched the deeply cynical “**Day at a Museum**” program, inviting refugees from Ukraine who have lost their home as the result of the Russian invasion to a museum. Russian museums offer discounts to participants of the war of aggression and join rehabilitation programs with the declared goal of bringing Russian soldiers back to the front as soon as possible.

While sending tanks and missiles to Ukraine, the Russian authorities began to unfold a campaign to legitimize their aggression and falsify history. **The Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation** plays a special role in the process.

For example, in April 2022, the Russian Historical Society, chaired by the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service **Sergey Naryshkin** (sanctioned by all EU countries, the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, Switzerland, New Zealand, Japan, etc.), established an **inter-museum group** under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation to collect items on the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories to “highlight the key events of the special military operation.” Naryshkin had publicly commented on the group’s activities multiple times; therefore, he seems to be very closely involved in its functioning.

The group encompasses specialists from more than 10 federal museums and educational institutions: the State Historical Museum, the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia, the Central Armed Forces Museum of the Russian Federation, the Southern Federal University and others. By the most recent

count, the group has collected more than 15,000 items that are being used to create museum expositions and other content.

The **exhibition “Ordinary Nazism,”** exhibited since May 2022 in the museums of approximately 20 Russian cities (the latest exposition opened on May 22, 2024 in Vladimir), had been put together based on the items collected by said group, under Naryshkin’s curatorship and with input from the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45, The Battle of Stalingrad Museum and the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia.

The exhibition received funding from **“The History of the Fatherland” Foundation,** established by a presidential Executive Order №163 on April 6, 2016 to support historical projects of the Russian government in the Russian Federation and abroad and financed from the Russian budget. The above-mentioned Sergey Naryshkin is also the chairman of the Foundation.

The exhibition blatantly falsifies the historical truth and seeks to discredit Ukraine and representatives of the international community that condemn the Russian aggression.

In April 2023, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin ordered that **“museums of the Special Military Operation”** should be created across the regions of the Russian Federation. Within this context, **“Methodological recommendations** regarding the creation of expositions dedicated to the history of the special military operation in museums of the Russian Federation” have been developed under the general leadership of Sergey Naryshkin and with direct participation of the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia.

The authors of the project make no mystery of their goal: to justify the claim that “Novorossiia” (the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine), much like Crimea before them, are allegedly “historically Russian lands.” This has to legitimize the military aggression, the occupation of Ukrainian territories and the killing of hundreds of thousands of victims.

The doctrine is implemented in museum institutions at every level, from school museums to municipal museums and the most celebrated institutions.

For example, the State Historical Museum opened the **exhibition “Novorossiya”**³ in September 2024, with one of its three parts focusing on legitimizing the Russian attack. The museum’s director Alexei Levykin had officially announced that some of the items on display had been collected by the museum’s team “during a work trip to the Lugansk People’s Republic,” that is, to the occupied Ukrainian territory. This is not just a violation of the museum code of ethics: this is an open admission of a crime of illegally crossing the state border of Ukraine. The perpetrators have to be brought to justice.

It should be noted that the “Novorossiya” exhibition’s official partners included the above-mentioned History of the Fatherland foundation, as well as the SVRxFOND,⁴ the personal foundation of one of the most notorious Russian propagandists Vladimir Solovyov (under personal sanctions in the EU states, the USA, the UK, Canada, Switzerland, Japan and other countries). Solovyov is known as one of the main Russian warmongers, and his foundation is directly involved in recruiting mercenaries to fight in Ukraine. This partnership is unacceptable not just professionally, but also on the level of common humanity.

Unfortunately, the State Historical Museum made justifications of Russia’s attack on Ukraine a crucial component of its work. For example, a “Museum of Don Cossacks” was opened under its “patronage” at the Stanytsia Luhanska Museum of Local Lore (the temporarily occupied Luhansk Oblast of Ukraine) as part of the implementation of the State Historical Museum’s program to create the Central Museum of Russian Cossacks (scheduled to open in 2024). The goal is to justify the claim that Luhansk region is “historically Russian land.”

This is not a unique outlier but a part of the Russian government’s comprehensive program to weaponize museums, supported by Russian museums themselves.

For example, in February 2023, the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia opened the **exhibition “Russia-Donbas: History and the Present,”**⁵ subsequently mounted in other regions of the Russian Federation. The Russian Historical Society, chaired by Sergey Naryshkin, is the exhibition’s partner, and the organizers have officially announced that some of the exhibits have been collected

³ <https://shm.ru/shows/35927/>

⁴ <https://svrfond.ru/>

⁵ https://www.sovrhitory.ru/data/exhibitions/2023/02/otkritie_donbass/index.php

by the inter-museum group for the collection of objects from the “zone of the special military operation.” The exhibition was financed by the **Presidential Foundation for Cultural Initiatives** (curator: First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia Sergey Kiriyyenko).

Ignoring these facts and tolerating such actions leads to the deterioration of the situation in Russia itself.

For example, on April 8, 2024, President Vladimir Putin signed the executive order **On the Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in Historical Education**. *De facto*, this decision instituted state monopoly on interpretations of history, introduced censorship, and destroyed the last vestiges of academic freedom and the space for free expression in many institutions, including museums.

The policy will be implemented by the specialized “interdepartmental committee on historical education” headed by Putin’s accomplice Vladimir Medinsky (also under personal international sanctions); the committee includes Sergey Naryshkin and other similar figures.

This approach has to encounter pushback through clear signals from the international community.

Destroying the Ukrainian identity on the territories occupied by Russia

Russian museums are directly involved not just in justifying the claims to “historic Russian lands” but also in destroying everything Ukrainian in the public spaces. Ukrainian language is under a *de facto* ban in museums on the temporarily occupied territories under the curatorship of Russian museums. A whole range of programs intended to change the population’s mindset have been unfolded.

For example, in August 2022, the Federal Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 (the Victory Museum) has launched the campaign “**Our Traditions**”⁶ under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation for the temporarily occupied Luhansk Oblast, which was by then almost fully controlled by the Russian army. The campaign was joined by 15 federal and regional institutions, including the State Historical Museum, the Russian Museum of

⁶ https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/v_lnr_dali_start_proektu_nashi_traditsii/

Ethnography, the Russian National Museum of Music, the State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSIZO and others.

They prepared dozens of exhibitions projects (mostly photographic exhibitions and displays with copies of museum items) for museums in Luhansk, Novoaidar, Novoposkov, Dovzhansk and other cities.

The campaign lasted into the spring of 2023, and the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation Olga Lyubimova regularly provided official reports on it.

According to Lyubimova, in 2023, Russian museums have organized more than 300 events on the occupied Ukrainian territories (excluding Crimea).

Events targeting children and young adults are especially dangerous. For example, the “School Victory Museum” program under the aegis of the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 conducts a ruthless campaign of propaganda and indoctrination for school pupils, justifying the criminal claim regarding the need to “denazify Ukraine.” The program extends to the occupied Ukrainian territories, where the program “To know! To remember! To take pride!”, financed by the Presidential Foundation for Cultural Initiatives, organizes expositions about “the heroes of the special military operation” and similar events.

The trend towards distorting history will only grow stronger. Russian officials say so directly.

For example, the Russian Historical Society has unveiled a network of its branches on the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories. During a consultation regarding the functioning of the Russian Historical Society on the occupied territory, held on May 31, 2024, in the city of Sevastopol, the Chairman of the Board of the Russian Historical Society Ruslan Gagkuev noted that the goal of the organization is to “form the all-Russian historical culture.” With that goal in mind, it will “support historical alliances” on the occupied territories.

It should be noted that since February 24, 2022, the Russian authorities have significantly stepped up their propaganda efforts in Latin America, Africa and Asia, where their colleagues are less familiar with the context. They may fall victim to manipulations and join projects with the figures under international sanctions.

The ICOM community should acknowledge that at the present moment any contact with a Russian museum means being complicit in the programs closely curated by the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation with the goal of justifying Russia's war crimes.

The Russian authorities have directly involved every Russian museum without exception, and with the leading museums, such as the State Hermitage, the Russian Museum, Peterhof and others first and foremost, in various forms of justifying and supporting the military aggression.

The director of the State Hermitage Mikhail Piotrovsky had often spoken out in support of Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014. The director of the Russian Museum Alla Manilova served as Deputy Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation in 2012-2023 and is personally responsible for the creation of Russia's criminal state policy regarding Ukrainian museums.

Tolerating these figures makes the situation worse for individual Russian scholars and museum experts that speak out, at a risk to their lives, against the war and in support of freedom of speech, freedom of creativity and scholarly endeavours.

The National Committee of ICOM of Ukraine calls on ICOM to stop any contact with the Russian committee until the cessation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. We also ask you to inform all the colleagues about the real role of Russian museums, and about possible consequences of any collaboration with them.

The National Committee of ICOM of Ukraine will prepare more detailed overviews of the actions of Russian museums in the coming months. These materials will be sent to Ukrainian law enforcement agencies and international institutions as part of our efforts to bring war criminals to justice.