

**Thumbnail Image:**



Feb 20, 2023 by **Volodymyr Sheiko**

## **Ukraine's Culture at War: One Year Later** <sup>[1]</sup>

**Note from the CPD Blog Manager:** *An earlier version of this article appeared on the LB.ua website on December 30, 2022: In the Spotlight: The Results of 2022 in Cultural Diplomacy. It has been adapted for publication in English with editorial input from CPD Faculty Fellow Vivian S. Walker, Executive Director of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy.*

On February 24, 2022, the world woke up to Russia's unprovoked war on Ukraine, which included a full-scale attack against our national identity, language and history.

Before this war, the world had little knowledge of, or interest in, Ukraine. Now people admire our courage, strength and ingenuity in the face of Russia's brutal onslaught. They sympathize with the plight of our people and offer multiple forms of assistance. But has the world truly begun to know us as a nation?

All along President Zelenskyy, our leaders and diplomats have reinforced Ukraine's identity as a functional and resilient democracy, a powerful regional player and a contributing member of

global economic and security alliances. However, this image of Ukraine is incomplete without a full understanding of its cultural dimension.

In the year since the start of the war, the Ukrainian Institute, other organizations and individuals have systematically engaged in cultural diplomacy initiatives to deepen global awareness of and appreciation for Ukraine's distinct national culture. At the same time, we have focused on debunking Russia's attempts to discredit our soft power legitimacy. Here are some of the highlights of our efforts.

First, the Ukrainian Institute recognized that Ukraine's assertion of its own cultural identity is impossible without emancipation from Russia's imperialist narrative and its thorough deconstruction and decolonization by the international community. So, we have compiled a selection of articles and research materials which illustrate how Russia has attempted to undermine Ukraine's distinct national culture through disinformation, appropriation of its cultural heritage and narrative manipulation.

At the same time, Ukraine took the fight for its identity to the world's premiere artistic venues. In fact, the war opened many doors for cultural diplomacy, which until February 24, 2022, had been barely open or completely inaccessible. Ukrainian culture is now available at leading museums and galleries, theaters and film festivals, sound stages and concert halls.

Highlights include the concert of Ukrainian and American choral music *Notes from Ukraine* at Carnegie Hall in New York, international appearances by the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra, the Kyiv Symphony Orchestra and other Ukrainian ensembles; the *Ukrainian pavilion* and public program on decolonization at the Venice Biennale; the contemporary art exhibition *The Captured House* in Berlin and Brussels; the exhibition of the Ukrainian avant-garde *In the Eye of the Storm* at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid; the Ukrainian theater program at the Avignon La Manufacture Festival; and the presentation of award-winning Ukrainian films (*Klondike*, *Pamfir*, and *The Vision of a Butterfly*, among others) at world-class film festivals.

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We have also developed targeted exhibits to raise global awareness about the existential threat that Russia's war poses to Ukraine's cultural heritage. The "*Postcards from Ukraine*" initiative, for example, captures the architectural devastation at the hands of Russian troops. Based on the premise that "it is impossible to mourn the loss of something that you did not even know existed," exhibitions in 20 countries alerted 20 million foreigners to the outright destruction of more than 550 Ukraine's historic landmarks, churches, museums and theaters.

Finally, the Ukrainian Institute and Ukraine's diplomatic corps conducted nuanced and thorough negotiations with dozens of institutions about the exclusion of Russian cultural products from the programs of festivals or concert venues, emphasizing the inadmissibility of performing Ukrainian and Russian works at the same event or organizing events designed simultaneously for participants from Ukraine and from Russia.

But there is much more that remains to be done. Here are some of the key challenges:

1. Cultural diplomacy should be acknowledged as an essential component of foreign and humanitarian policy and must be resourced appropriately by the state. Moreover, a long and difficult period of post-war recovery is ahead, which will require a sustained investment in and promotion of Ukraine's soft power assets.
2. Foreign partners and donors have made substantial emergency contributions in the form of grants, residencies and scholarships to ensure the survival of Ukrainian culture. Going forward this support should be converted into long-term, sustained programs, especially for those institutions and artists who have returned to or remained in Ukraine.
3. Ukraine's leadership has made engagement with the Global South a strategic priority. The Ukrainian Institute and Ukrainian embassies need additional resources and expertise to expand Ukraine's currently limited cultural presence in key countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, India and Indonesia.
4. The Ukrainian Institute's associate membership in the EU National Institutes for Culture network enables access to funding for cultural diplomacy projects and allows Ukraine to exert a stronger influence on the cultural policies of the European Union. We must leverage our EUNIC membership to lobby for additional resources in support of Ukraine's cultural dimension.
5. Support for Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar studies in foreign universities, think tanks and policy centers should become a cornerstone of our cultural diplomacy. Institutions that currently focus on Slavic, Russian and Eurasian studies should be transformed into centers of inclusivity that reflect a broad range of "Eastern" cultures and influences as well as question their Russia-centric perspectives on the region.
6. The projection of national culture abroad requires strong institutions at home to produce high-quality, meaningful content. But the war has done enormous damage to Ukraine's film industry, museums, theaters and publishing houses. Without significant support, Ukraine's cultural diplomacy may soon run out of culture.

Recently, Polish diplomat, writer and cultural expert Paweł Potoroczyn noted that "there is nothing soft about soft power. Whenever culture is instrumentalized, it is no longer a cultural exchange. Russia's war against Ukraine may well be the first deeply cultural war in history." To prevail against Russia's sustained attack on Ukraine's soft power legitimacy, our cultural diplomacy must be able to fight back.

*Image: The cover image is a graphic from Notes from Ukraine: A 100-Year Celebration of Carol of the Bells concert at Carnegie Hall, New York. Courtesy of The Ukrainian Institute.*

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