

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing
on
Erasing Ukrainian Identity and Culture**

**September 25, 2024 - 3:00 p.m
2247 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Statement of Hadar Harris
Managing Director, Washington
PEN America**

Thank you Co-Chair Smith and Co-Chair McGovern for convening this important hearing today. My name is Hadar Harris and I am the Managing Director of PEN America's Washington Office. PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and around the globe. We champion the freedom to write and work to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible.

In 1986, I worked for Congressman Tom Lantos, for whom this commission is named. The late Congressman Lantos and his wife Annette, using their own personal experiences as Holocaust survivors from Hungary, created the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (of which I was the Executive Director) to focus the attention of not only the US Congress, but the whole United States Government, on critically important human rights issues at a time when few were discussing them. With Congressman John Porter, from Illinois, they were able to garner bipartisan support for so many important human rights priorities. It was a privilege to work with them both - and it is a point of personal privilege - and no small emotion - for me to be carrying his legacy forward in our discussions today. He would have been outraged by Russian efforts to decimate culture and identity in Ukraine - and he would be pleased that we are focusing on this today.

As Russia's aggression toward Ukraine accelerated first toward the annexation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014 and then to full-scale invasion in 2022, a systematic policy by Russia's armed forces to destroy Ukrainian culture and identity became apparent. These actions are a continuation of Russia's historical and contemporary patterns of behavior to erase Ukrainian identity and culture. Russia's assault on tangible Ukrainian cultural heritage manifests through multiple mechanisms, including the widespread looting of cultural heritage objects; targeted destruction of built cultural heritage, including museums, theaters, libraries, and monuments; restoration of Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar cultural sites in the Russian style; and the destruction of

Ukrainian language books. This massive scale of damage has been accompanied by other threats to culture, such as the erasure of cultural identity through historical revisionism, prohibition of the use of the Ukrainian language in temporarily occupied territories, and the loss of intangible cultural heritage through displacement. Much of this has been documented in PEN America's 2022 report, [Ukrainian Culture Under Attack](#). What I will discuss has been updated through discussions with PEN Ukraine, the Artists at Risk Connection, and other available sources.

Tetyana Teren, executive director of PEN Ukraine recently said, "Destruction of Ukrainian culture and identity has been one of Russia's aims both during the occupation of Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and during the full-scale invasion in February 2022. It is crucial to understand that imperialistic Russian attempts to destroy Ukrainian identity and culture did not start nine months or nine years ago but have been going on for centuries. This report demonstrates the magnitude of Ukrainian cultural losses since 24 February 2022 and confirms that, in many cases, cultural objects have been the direct aim of Russian attacks. These atrocities must be documented and investigated within the framework of national and international accountability mechanisms, and all perpetrators responsible for the deaths of Ukrainian cultural figures and the loss of our cultural heritage punished."

The Use of Culture to "Justify" War Goals

For more than three hundred years, Ukrainian thinkers, writers, linguists, artists, and scholars have faced Imperial Russian and Soviet efforts to deny, assimilate, and eliminate their culture and language. Olesya Khromeychuk, a historian and director of the Ukrainian Institute in London, detailed efforts by various Russian tsars to eliminate Ukrainian culture, including banning Ukrainian-language publications, prohibiting cultural societies, and exiling or imprisoning public intellectuals. She explained that "writers, poets, and artists became the figures who shaped national identity."

For decades, Russia has negated Ukrainian national identity, culture and language. As justification for its invasion, Russia has used a multiplicity of arguments which negate or denigrate Ukrainian independence. In a July 2021 essay published on the Kremlin website, Putin claimed that there is no historic basis for the "idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians," that the Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" and that no Ukrainian nation existed prior to Soviet Russia's creation of it. In Putin's view, everything and everyone identified as Ukrainian is effectively fiction, which must be eliminated, and Ukraine must be returned to the so-called "Russian World."

To further delegitimize Ukrainian national identity and culture and justify the invasion, Russia resorted to the demonization of Ukrainian culture by evoking Nazism. Putin and the pro-Putin ideological elite have described Ukrainian political leadership and Ukrainian people as "Nazis," with Russia originally describing its military goal to "denazify the country."

Russia has made clear that the elimination of culture is an explicit target of its campaign in Ukraine and has used this specious charge of “Nazism” as justification: “Denazification of the mass of the population consists in re-education, which is achieved by ideological repression (suppression) of Nazi attitudes and strict censorship: not only in the political sphere, but also necessarily in the sphere of culture and education.”

Russia’s leadership has further sought to justify its actions in Ukraine with false claims of widespread and pervasive attacks and discrimination against Ukraine’s Russian speakers, a population that Russia regards as ethnically Russian (of note, Putin’s claim that Ukrainian Russian speakers possess an ethnic identity distinct from their neighbors contradicts his assertion that all Ukrainians are ethnically indistinguishable from Russians).

The Erasure of Culture and Identity - in Place and Person - as a War Goal

With those clear objectives in mind, Russia has carried out extensive, coordinated actions to marginalize, undermine, and ultimately eliminate the tangible and intangible manifestations of Ukrainian culture since its illegal occupation of Crimea, and parts of Luhansk and Donetsk. Russia’s actions, which included damaging important cultural buildings and undermining the teaching of and in Ukrainian in those territories, now serve as a blueprint for their cultural erasure efforts in areas they have invaded and occupied since the full-scale war against Ukraine began on February 24, 2022. They have been supplemented by physical destruction of cultural infrastructure on a massive scale.

The destruction of Ukrainian cultural infrastructure and cultural heritage sites has been a significant component of Russia’s assault on Ukraine. Russian military attacks have damaged or destroyed hundreds of cultural buildings and objects, including museums, theaters, monuments, statues, places of worship, cemeteries, historical buildings, libraries, archives, as well as schools and universities. Russian attacks have also damaged or destroyed local cultural centers (“houses of culture”), concert venues and stadiums, and other locations where people access culture in their communities. Some of these attacks were deliberate, targeted attacks, such as on Mariupol’s Academic Regional Drama Theater, which was sheltering hundreds of civilians, including children, when Russian aircraft dropped two bombs on it in March 2022. In the Kyiv region, in the first days of the Russian assault, a Russian missile struck the Ivankiv Historical and Local History Museum, setting it on fire, the only building in the village to be struck during that time.

On September 4, 2024, during a missile attack on Lviv, Russia [struck the buffer zone](#) of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. Nineteen objects that have the status of local cultural heritage monuments, as well as seven educational institutions and one cultural institution, were damaged. This is only one recent example.

As of July 25, 2024, the [Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications reports](#) that 2024 cultural institutions (including those under the Ministry of Culture and other central executive bodies) have been affected. In addition, the Ministry reports that 334 cultural heritage sites have been destroyed. Cultural institutions have been damaged in nearly 20% of territorial communities

In addition, the United States-based Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab (CHML) and the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative (SCRI) and the University of Maryland's Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) have been monitoring 28,000 cultural sites in Ukraine through a combination of remote sensing, open-source research, and satellite imagery. They have found that approximately 7.4% of the sites they are monitoring (roughly 2,122 sites) have been potentially damaged from February 24, 2022 through April 30, 2024. These include archaeological sites, arts centers, monuments, memorials, museums, places of worship, libraries, and archives. They found that memorials and places of worship have sustained the highest rates of potential impact.

In some cases, the damage or destruction to cultural sites was likely a result of indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks by the Russian forces. Russia's military operation has been characterized as regular and repeated sweeping attacks on densely populated civilian areas resulting in massive damage to civilian houses, hospitals, schools, and other civilian infrastructure, as well as deaths and injury. Russia has utilized explosive weapons with wide-area effects such as air-dropped bombs, missiles, heavy artillery shells, and multiple launch rockets. It has also used cluster munitions that typically open in the air and send dozens, even hundreds, of small bomblets over an extensive area.

The damage and destruction cannot be seen as simply incidental, collateral damage resulting from Russian military operations targeting Ukrainian military targets. Rather, the magnitude of the destruction suggests a deliberate campaign to destroy civilian infrastructure, rendering some cities barely habitable, and an attempt to destroy civilian morale.

While it is not always possible to determine if the bombings of cultural sites are deliberate or the result of Russia's indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, the independent research organization Bellingcat has stated that "the sheer number of cultural sites damaged or under threat indicates that it is highly unlikely they are being excluded from Russia's bombardment."

These attacks, whether targeted or the result of indiscriminate assaults on civilian infrastructure, are prohibited under international law, and may constitute war crimes.

In addition, the impact on cultural voice, creators and workers has been devastating. They are amongst the thousands killed and injured by Russian attacks, or detained and threatened by Russian forces. Many have fled their homes and communities to reach safety; they have lost loved ones, homes, and precious possessions. They have been cut off from their creative communities and colleagues, and they have seen their studios, galleries, and exhibition spaces destroyed, damaged, and

closed. The need to focus on survival has frequently taken precedence over creative work and even when Ukrainian culture is not being deliberately targeted, the war has deeply disrupted creative production.

As of August 2024, PEN Ukraine reports that at least 123 civilian artists, writers, and other cultural workers have been killed as a result of Russian military attacks as well as a number of cultural figures killed in combat while defending Ukraine. Their loss is incalculable.

Last year, PEN Ukraine and the Ukrainians Media launched “People of Culture Taken Away By The War,” a project about the cultural figures killed during the Russo-Ukrainian full-scale war. It is a series of portraits that emerged while studying these people’s achievements, conversations with their relatives and colleagues, and journeys across Ukraine. The project is regularly updated with new stories, which you can read [here](#).

Journalists have also been a target. Since the beginning of the full-scale war, Russia has killed [86 Ukrainian and foreign journalists](#) and committed [620 crimes](#) against journalists and media in Ukraine. Russian troops continue to attack and kidnap members of the press in the territory of Ukraine.

In recent actions, in August, three media workers were [killed in action](#): Volodymyr Chernyshov, Oleksiy Sapuha, and Bohdan Zatula. On the night of August 24, Russia [attacked the Saphir Hotel](#) in Kramatorsk. Ryan Evans, a member of the Reuters team reporting on the war in Ukraine, was killed, and two other Reuters journalists were injured. Among them is Ukrainian cameraman Ivan Lubysh-Kirdey, who is now in critical condition.

The PEN Ukraine online memorial [Requiem](#) collects stories of journalists who have died as a result of Russian aggression. The project's mission is to tell the truth about media workers who have sacrificed their lives to preserve and show the world the true face of the aggressor.

Russification of Identity, Culture and Education

Russia-backed separatists and Russian occupying forces have required that cultural events and expression at schools, universities, and local history museums reflect Soviet and Russian history and mythology, including “the heroism of Soviet soldiers, industrial workers, and the greatness of Russian history.” They have constructed monuments commemorating the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as writers, singers, and other artistic figures from Russian and Soviet history, in high-traffic public places.

Ukrainian radio and television channels are no longer accessible and Russian and local channels broadcast Russian and Soviet propaganda and anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Ukrainian flags and state symbols have been removed and replaced with those of Russia; Ukrainian location signage has been

replaced with signs in Russian; and large video screens displaying propaganda have been placed in locations such as humanitarian aid distribution points or water collection sites in Mariupol.

Russian and separatist forces also use education as a key vehicle for Russification efforts in occupied regions. Following their takeover in the “DPR,” separatist authorities attempted to return the region to a Russian and Soviet system of education, prohibiting teaching in Ukrainian in schools. Teachers were given the option of retraining to teach in Russian, but teachers of Ukrainian language and literature in the “DPR” and “LPR” lost their jobs. At the university level, “DPR” authorities dismissed rectors of several universities and eliminated the department of Ukrainian history.

The cultural erasure campaign has also involved seizing and destroying Ukrainian literature and Ukrainian-language books. Beginning in March 2022, occupying authorities seized or destroyed Ukrainian history books and literature they deemed to be “extremist” from public libraries in cities and towns in the occupied territories of Luhansk, Donetsk, Chernihiv, and Sumy, according to the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine. This included books about Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, Ukrainian liberation movements, Ukraine’s military operations against separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and, in some locations, the nonfiction book, *The Case of Vasyl Stus*, about a Ukrainian poet who was imprisoned by the Soviet regime.

Nowhere have these trends been more clear than in Crimea. Since the illegal occupation of Crimea began in 2014 and escalated in 2022, Russian authorities have attempted to suppress the use of Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian languages in schools; they have banned access to independent media and Ukrainian- and Crimean Tatar-language broadcasts; and they have illegally detained, imprisoned, and tortured writers, artists, and other cultural figures, especially those critical of the occupation. These tactics are an effort to erase Ukrainian language, art, and culture, and in Crimea in particular, aim to systematically eliminate the identity, language, and culture of the Crimean Tatar community—indigenous Muslims who have suffered a long history of repression, violence, and persecution. What has happened in Crimea has been replicated in other parts of Ukraine now under Russian occupation.

The Russian occupation has completely transformed political, civic, educational, and cultural life in Crimea. In an effort to eradicate Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar culture, they have harassed and threatened people who produce and protect culture in an effort to silence them and to stop them from writing and producing creative works. Twenty eight media workers and citizen journalists were held in captivity in 2023 in occupied areas of Ukraine, including the 2022 PEN/Barbey Freedom To Write honoree, Vladyslav Yesypenko, who is serving a six-year sentence on false charges. The FSB detained Yesypenko in March 2021 immediately after attending an event in honor of Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko in Simferopol. Yesypenko was tortured in detention and, in February 2022, sentenced to six years in prison. He remains unjustly imprisoned today.

Russian authorities have also attempted to suppress the use of Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian languages in schools. Officials have pressured children and their parents not to request Crimean Tatar- or Ukrainian-language instruction and instruction in these languages, especially Ukrainian, has decreased. In 2017, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) expressed concerns about “restrictions faced by Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians in exercising their economic, social, and cultural rights, particularly the rights to work, to express their own identity and culture, and to education in the Ukrainian language.”

Russian authorities have banned access to independent media and Ukrainian- and Crimean Tatar-language broadcasts, replacing the content with Russian programming and a pro-Russian Crimean Tatar-language station. The Crimean Human Rights Group has reported numerous efforts to block popular Ukrainian online media as well as efforts to jam Ukrainian FM radio station signals, again limiting access to Ukrainian media in Crimea.

Russian occupying forces have systematically attacked Crimea’s cultural heritage, taking over 4,095 sites of national and local importance and including them in Russia’s cultural heritage protection system. In some cases, this has resulted in significant harm to protected cultural sites. The occupying authorities have also unlawfully transferred artworks and artifacts from Crimea for exhibitions in numerous cities in Russia, and undertaken unauthorized archaeological excavations or mounted construction initiatives on archaeological and cultural heritage sites, including some dating to medieval and ancient times. These activities may infringe on the article 9 of Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention, which prohibits such activity except where it is necessary to “safeguard, record or preserve cultural property.” What is happening in Crimea, is happening throughout other Russian-occupied spaces in Ukraine.

Preservation of Cultural Sites and Resilience of Cultural Figures

Despite the pervasive attacks, Ukrainian writers, poets, artists, and cultural defenders demonstrate remarkable resilience and resistance in the face of this brutal conflict and attack against their culture. Many draw strength from their connections to Ukrainian culture and are actively seeking new ways to produce and promote culture. Writers are writing wartime diaries. They are giving literary readings in bookstores against the backdrop of air-raid sirens, and concerts in metro stations doubling as bomb shelters.

The Ukrainian government and civil society are working to protect and preserve Ukrainian culture, with the support of the international community, which has responded to Russia’s war with economic, political, financial, and military support for Ukraine, including notable efforts to protect cultural heritage and support cultural workers. However, traditional approaches to cultural preservation in wartime focus mostly on tangible, physical manifestations of culture—protecting works of art or artifacts and prominent buildings. The 1954 Hague Convention includes a narrow

definition of culture entitled to protection, namely movable or immovable *property*, and that which is specifically “of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people.”

Culture, however, comprises significantly more than just the buildings we can visit and the objects we can admire. The concept of “heritage” is also a limiting one, in that it denotes a cultural past without reference to the present or future. Culture comprises peoples’ beliefs, customs, mythology, knowledge, traditions, and perspectives on the past, present, and future, as manifested in its art, literature, music, dance, religion, and other forms. Culture unites and gives words and expressions to shared feelings and experiences. These crucial aspects of Ukraine’s culture are under direct attack and facing serious threats.

Ukraine’s international partners and anyone supporting Ukrainian efforts to survive as an independent, democratic nation must move beyond a narrow definition of cultural heritage, and instead take an expansive and people-centered view to ensure Ukrainian culture can flourish for generations to come. As the Ukrainian government, its international allies, and multilateral institutions plan for the future phases of this war and its aftermath, cultural vitality and continuity should be an explicit point of emphasis, aiming to ensure that Russia’s war on Ukrainian culture does not succeed.

Creative workers are essential given their role in producing and sustaining culture; they both preserve the past and create the future. PEN America’s Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), with support from others, has launched a \$2.2 million fund that is providing emergency and resilience assistance to visual artists from Ukraine and the regions that are affected by the ongoing war.

Given the ongoing attacks on culture and identity in Ukraine, PEN America urges the following:

Protect Ukrainian Culture by: Passing legislation modeled after the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act of 2016 to guard against trafficking in looted Ukrainian cultural objects, including waiver ability to allow such artifacts to enter the United States for temporary safekeeping and restoration.

Secure Accountability for Violations of Cultural Rights by: Ensuring destruction of and attacks against culture are included as an integral component in national and international accountability efforts undertaken in relation to the war in Ukraine.

Support Cultural Workers by: Providing funding support for research, scholarships, and exchange programs for cultural workers affected by the war.

Protect Ukrainian Human Rights Defenders by: Passing the Human Rights Defenders Protection Act.

It is precisely in times of war and conflict that culture and identity become crucial touchstones to help process and understand the impact of conflict.

Iya Kiva, a poet, fled Donetsk in 2014 after the Russian invasion. She described being displaced in Ukraine and finding meaning as a writer during the war: “Left without a home, without property, without any prospects for the future, I realized that only one thing cannot be taken away from me by force: language and the ability to write . . . The most difficult thing for me was to convince myself that words, voice, poetry, [and] literature are still important. That they have not lost their meaning, but rather changed their meaning . . . The war speaks for itself so loudly and convincingly that all words next to it seem like incomprehensible noise . . . However, this is actually the task of literature in war, to restore weight to words—words of peace and love, so that all our testimonies outweigh the language of war.”