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Countering the erasure of cultural identity in war and peace

Reply to Recommendation[1]: Recommendation 2280 (2024)
Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has carefully examined Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2280 (2024) "Countering the erasure of cultural identity in war and peace", which it has forwarded to the Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape (CDCPP) and to the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU) for information and possible comments.

2. As stated on the occasion of the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government in Reykjavík in 2023, the Committee of Ministers recalls that the European Cultural Convention, of which we celebrate the 70th anniversary this year, emphasised already in 1954 the important role of our shared cultural heritage and diversity in building a common European culture to achieve greater unity between the member States and a greater understanding between the peoples of Europe. In the present more interconnected and intercultural world, the importance of nurturing such diversity is even more crucial for preserving democratic, tolerant and inclusive societies. Attempts to erasing culture, heritage and cultural identity go against the founding principles of the Council of Europe. As also recalled by the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (the Faro Convention), access to and enjoyment of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are part of the human rights' system and fundamental to individual and collective cultural identity.

3. The Committee reaffirms its condemnation of the war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and its unwavering support to Ukraine through the Council of Europe's Enlarged Partial Agreement on the Register of Damage caused by the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the following steps for the creation of a comprehensive compensation mechanism. In this respect, the Committee recalls that a declaration on the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine was adopted during the Conference of the Ministers responsible for Culture held in Strasbourg on 1 April 2022, in which the Ministers committed to assisting Ukraine, as necessary, in dealing with the threats to its cultural heritage and its urgent preservation.

4. The Committee is regularly informed by the Ukrainian authorities on the situation related to threats to culture and cultural heritage as a result of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. It shares the view of the Parliamentary Assembly that damage to cultural heritage and cultural infrastructure in Ukraine should be accurately recorded within the framework of the Register of Damage. The Committee emphasises the significance of safeguarding cultural sites in Ukraine, underscoring their role as a testament to the nation's history and as educational spaces to ensure the lessons of the past are remembered by future generations.

5. The Committee also recalls that the Action Plan for Ukraine "Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction" 2023-2026 includes a new specific line of action associated with the preservation of culture and cultural heritage aimed at promoting such heritage as a starting point in reconstruction and at enhancing culture and creative industries. It aims for concrete actions to be developed in that context, in close co-operation with the Ukrainian authorities and civil society. This would contribute to reinforcing Ukrainian cultural identity, to countering any further attempt against it and to recovering from the attacks that it has already suffered over the years.

1. Adopted at the 1527th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (30 April 2025).

6. The Committee of Ministers also values Ukraine's continued active participation in the European Heritage Days (EHD) programme as a means for supporting local communities during the war. The EHD annual themes of "Architectural Heritage" in 2025 and "Heritage at Risk" in 2026 present an opportunity to highlight awareness, stories, ideas and practices that contribute to the protection of heritage during war, as well as in reconstructing and safeguarding living heritage and the identity of communities affected by the conflict.

7. The Committee also draws attention to existing standards, such as the Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property (CETS No. 221, the "Nicosia Convention), which is an instrument aiming at preventing and combating the illicit trafficking and destruction of cultural property, including when it results from an armed conflict, and invites member States to ratify it. The adoption of specific legal measures, namely the criminalisation of the illicit trafficking of cultural property and other associated criminal offences, can contribute to the fight against the systematic destruction of cultural heritage and looting of cultural property by ensuring prosecution, including in the context of war. The Committee notes that the Council of Europe is available to co-operate with UNESCO, whose 1954 Hague Convention focuses on armed conflict cases, as well as with other concerned international organisations, to find possible responses to avoid any kind of cultural erasure.

8. The Committee also takes this opportunity to inform the Parliamentary Assembly that it closely follows the endeavours to ensure the continuity of the Ukrainian educational service, including in countries hosting significant numbers of refugees. In this context, a Mapping Study on children of Ukraine's access to education in Council of Europe member States has been prepared by the Council of Europe's Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU). The study warns that language barriers, limited school capacity and difficulties of tracking out-of-school children are among the key challenges faced with respect to millions of children from Ukraine seeking refuge and access to education in Europe – as well as by their host States. The study suggests that it is time to move from emergency solutions to more sustainable, long-term mechanisms.

9. Finally, as regards Belarus, the Committee of Ministers considers that freedom of cultural expression is an important element of the preservation of a democratic society. Protection of Belarusian culture and language, as distinctive characteristics of the Belarusian people and a democratic Belarus, is in line with the Council of Europe's core values of human rights, democracy and rule of law.