

Audio file

[Vonnak.mp3](#)

Blurb

"Welcome to another episode of the Oxford Anthropology Podcast. I'm Lan Duo, a DPhil candidate specializing in contemporary wellbeing in metropolitans. In today's episode, we're delighted to have Dr. Diana Vonnak from the University of Stirling to share her extensive and thought-provoking research on state and civic actors in Ukraine's wartime heritage work. Having dedicated eight years to this topic and carried-on her fieldwork throughout, Dr. Vonnak reflects on how sociohistorical events impact the definition, preservation, and sometimes neglect of cultural heritage. Her insights are invaluable for those interested in cultural heritage works in Ukraine and beyond. Enjoy!"

Transcript

The paper I will deliver today builds on a long sequence of fieldwork that I've conducted in Ukraine over the course of the last eight years, and it will most heavily build on emerging material from the past, nearly two years or freshest, full-scale war against Ukraine, specifically four months of in-person fieldwork that I conducted in a series of shorter trips interviewing heritage professionals and most prominently professionals in the museum sector and the municipal organisations. This was supplemented by online interviews and participant observation, in webinars, conferences, meetings of heritage professionals across different national and international alliances and institutional constellations. In the summer, I spent three months of in-person fieldwork in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically in Austria, Poland, Estonia and Latvia, where I met officials from Ministries of Culture, from national heritage, associations, from individual museums, municipal authorities, so broadly speaking, so, again, the representative of the heritage sector that mobilised in support of the Ukrainian colleagues.

I've been trying to map out the main logistical and institutional chain through which help is organised, trying to understand the bottlenecks, trying to understand the political economy of all of it and the discourse is, of course, that that inform this mobilisation, which differs as you might imagine in neighbouring countries and in Western Europe or in international organisations like the EU or UNESCO. I've been trying to trace all of this and connect it to this emerging picture that I've acquired from Ukrainian heritage professionals trying to see: how help is distributed across Ukraine across different institutional scales; how the fate of more prestigious, better recognised heritage organisations asides differs from more remote, less prestigious, slightly more marginalised institutions and professionals, and trying to understand how to improve the system. This is part of a. Partially applied research project that I currently work on. This is a joint program in initiative, European Union scheme, where in a consortium of three universities we are trying to map this whole infrastructure of support and care in this sector and eventually, we are developing policy recommendations for the EU on this basis.

I'm stressing this because I think some of this policy thinking of course goes against the strictly analytical questions that I would have. I'm trying to open it out and connect it back to this broader, more theoretical picture, but the agenda of this current work that I've done is a bit more fast-paced and it in a way I think mirrors the urgency of the events that we are witnessing. The materials that I will broadly build on come from around a year and a half of ethnographic fieldwork that I've

conducted in Ukraine, mostly in Lviv, a city in western Ukraine. It's really close to the Polish border. I first spent a year there and then in shorter instalments I spent around half a year there, and in Kiev, the capital, between 2015 and 2021, possibly even more. I'm not sure, because although I spent most of my time there as a PhD student and then as a postdoctoral researcher, I also spent quite a substantial amount of time working in exactly the kind of EU grants that I also studied as an anthropologist, so I'm bringing a kind of dual perspective to this material, for better or worse, you will tell me whether it's for better or worse. I think although these were not formal field work opportunities, they definitely shaped very substantially how I look at my own material and how I retrospectively was able to rethink my materials.

What I'm trying to do with all of this is developing it into a book project that on the one hand looks at the changing role of the state in Ukraine through this lens of heritage management and heritage preservation, and on the other hand, it tries to say something about the heritage industry and the expansion of the heritage industry that I think has something significant to tell us about the post industry of this urban transformations across Europe. And the perspective of political economy that I adopt is not something that we see very commonly applied to this even now with the of course the fast expansion of the literature and both anthropology and sociology of cultural heritage.

So why do I think that heritage is an interesting angle to look at war and state transformation and revolution. I came to look at heritage to focus on heritage because I was interested in understanding what happens when large, transformative socioeconomic processes change not only social relations, but also how the discourse around the past and the present is organised. And I am from Hungary, so it's a neighbouring country of Ukraine and I grew up in exactly with this post-Cold War transformation that we might stop calling post-Cold War, I think. And so, this was the story that occupied very much my mind as I started to think about the society around me before I became an anthropologist. And I just emphasised this because I think this is an optic that I brought to Ukrainet that arguably changed what was important for me to understand as opposed to someone who didn't spend their non-professional life in such an environment?

So heritage, if you think about its everyday meaning would refer to objects, practises and knowledge that sustain cultural worth across generations. But if you think about the globalised institutional framework that deals with the recognition and the management of heritage, then heritage also should be described as a form of governance. This infrastructure is linked to the post Second World War UN system, specifically UN agencies like UNESCO and as such nation states or its basic units. Because nation states are so integral to the functioning of this system, transformations rapid change like the dissolution of the USSR and Ukrainian independence are crucial points that have very strong implications to what counts as heritage, what sort of recognition it has, and how it is dealt with.

Nomination processes for World Heritage status are always initiated by the nation state, again, for better or worse, significant critique has been articulated because of the marginalisation of minority heritage, indigenous heritage and so on, and so on. And there is an emerging framework that looks at heritage through a discourse of human rights that has questioned this hegemonic logic of the UNESCO-driven World Heritage System. But it has not undone the UNESCO-led industry that is both the hospitality industry and it's also part of a broader white-collar economy. Tied to very gentrification, heavy Urban Development is something that arguably has shaped our cities across the globe in a really significant fashion. Nation states are embedded in this process and because of this, when I started to work on this topic nine years ago, I thought that heritage offers a good angle, a good entry point into understanding these broader processes of socioeconomic change.

What's important here is also that the state does not only have monopoly in the international arena. And also has monopoly over recognition and management of heritage inside the nation state. So, it creates and maintains a hierarchy of recognition. Obviously, I don't want to say that heritage does not exist with outside of the system of recognition, but obtaining this official status and the regulatory devices that come with it, or the potential resources that come with it, is crucial in the fate of any site or practise or form of knowledge that is described by communities or by states as heritage.

As I said it already what we consider heritage expanded enormously in the past roughly 30-40 years. Heritage in the way we know it today is a part of a very Eurocentric form of post enlightenment modernity. It essentially appoints the state as a custodian of what is described as a shared inheritance. The paradoxical nature of it is that it starts from a very upper class concerned monuments and estates and things like that in the late 19th century, and from this it expands gradually into vernacular architecture into movable property into intangible heritage, into assemblies where natural and cultural heritage, they are brought together. So basically, there is an ever-growing class base of it and the ever diverse forms. It is linked. I think to this expansion the extent to which we see it as an economic asset, even actors like the World Bank have started to recognise cultural heritage, not just cultural but mostly cultural heritage in their lending practises. This is of course again because of heritage being a driving factor in a certain kind of urban transformation, not just urban, but urban transformations I think are the where it's the most spectacular.

So when I went to Ukraine to look at what happened since the late 70s, I've done archival research and I've done ethnographic research. I was interested in this expansion, this late, Soviet expansion of this infrastructure in a very different economic context in a planned economy. What happened to it? Not only with the dissolution of that polity within which it emerged, so the independence of Ukraine and the collapse of the federal state of the of the USSR, but also I was interested in this historical Nexus basically whereby independence of Ukraine this rapid change coincides with this global story of the expansion of heritage and the inclusion of heritage into this sort of gentrification driven white collar Urban Development. Everywhere in the world, but very heavily in Europe. What's interesting, I think about the so-called collapse of the USSR is that all of our everyday metaphors collapsed. The solution the suggest sort of significant break. The implication of this language is, is that something, something very rapid happens, something very irreversible happens. I don't think this metaphor describes accurately what happened. Either in terms of the institutional structures or the personnel that works in this sector. While in many countries in the Warsaw Pact in the 1990s, we see a very fast influx of foreign capital privatisation efforts that are often pushed through programmes that that are delivered by foreign experts, it's a sort of geopolitical alignment that takes place really fast and it comes with a very rapid institutional change in the public sector, in Ukraine and in many other former constituent republics of the USSR. What we have instead is a process of legal and institutional uncertainty for quite a few years, specifically in Ukraine, what we see is that and I follow here, the political scientist Paul Danieli, who says that in a way, the reform programme of the perestroika in the last six years of the USSR, that was initiated by Gorbachev, was something that threatened hardliners in the Communist Party. They threatened the nomenclatura and in many constituent republics, including Ukraine, these hardliners were very much pushed. They essentially chose to back independence. As a way of avoiding certain pressures of the perestroika.

So, what you have is a strong democratic opposition movement coming into a really uncomfortable alliance in the Parliament with these old nomenclatura these old party leadership. We have a period of sort of 5-6 years when there is no new constitution, the whole legal framework is a mess. And there is very quick and very deep economic crisis all over the former Soviet Union, definitely also in

Ukraine, the division of the executive power between the President and the Prime Minister and the Parliament is not clear in this initial period at all. And what we see is that there is this gradual expansion of an oligarchic concentration of power in the, especially in the very capital-heavy sectors. But the deregulation that we see in neighbouring countries like Poland or the Czech Republic or Hungary, Slovakia, they, they don't take place quite as much in Ukraine. Instead, you have these former elites like the Heads of State Enterprises, that are often called the Red Directors Party bureaucrats, state security personnel taking a lead in this violent and really fast privatisation and that leaves the country with the very high inequality and the very strongly weakened social state. It's not just the social state that gets weakened, but public services in general and what happens to the cultural sector and the heritage sector specifically, is that the old institutional structures survive. There is no comprehensive reform to change how they function, what they are, what kind of jobs are available in them. But they are not funded anymore. The budgets are cut often and the salaries are cut or just not paid for half a year even. And so basically, they can't fulfil their mandate. This is a very heavy crisis in throughout this sector. So, it's restoration because it's the architectural offices or cultural offices and city councils in the regional administrations, this is museums. This is pretty much the entire sector.

This is not something that's completely new. So what's important to look at, I think, and it will have relevance in the ongoing war, is that although we see an expansion in the 70s of the Soviet cultural heritage infrastructure. It has no it had not been the case that this infrastructure had sustainable and predictable funding even in those decades, because how it worked is that, if you designated an area within the Soviet economy as a heritage reserve area, that area was not part of the planned economy in the sense that it did not have to fulfil any production quotas. It was taken out of the planned economy. Because of this, it did not have any lobbying power when it came to discussions around local and regional budgets. It was something that was always. Overshadowed by the interests of the state enterprises that we're running the show in pretty much all of these cities. So what you see is a gradual dilapidation of this infrastructure, even as museums are open, even as there are increased attention and sort of acceptance of the past that before had not really being prominent in the history of the Soviet Union, it does not come with budgets that enable proper maintenance.

So this, in a sense, I think even with the expansion, what we can see is decades long, at least stagnation followed by this radical crisis in the 90s. What do people do? The officials that I did life history interviews with in live in 2015, talked about essentially trying to collapse this really vertical, very centralised apparatus. What they tried to do was to redesignate large parts of the city into a locally managed reserve. This is the current the yellow things are the current UNESCO World Heritage Site in in Lviv and the blue is the extended area that is under municipal protection. The yellow is also the same territory that was protected within the Soviet era system, and the blue is the expansion that these local municipal professionals claimed in the very early 90s. What they did was de facto, they took it out of the vertical that is managed by the Ministry of Culture and they try to essentially claim managerial monopoly over it now.

This is reflective of this really hierarchical really vertical system that they perceived hindered local decision making. This is something that was that reached all the way up to Moscow and the Soviet Union still existed, and we definitely still reached all the way up to Kiev after 1991. They basically said that they it was a bet on their side that if they factor start to manage it the state will basically not come back and take that right away. So, in a sense we can say that the state in those in those years did not have enough power to maintain its monopoly over heritage, the central state did not have proper executive power. If you want to read it like that, and instead there is a challenge that comes from in a sort of bottom-up way and these people saying no, this is the polity that elects us. We

represent this polity. And this is very different from the composition of the Parliament. This is through the regional variations are really significant in, in, in Ukraine in terms of voting. So they say. OK. We are this democratic opposition, the nationalist democratic opposition that has taken the majority regionally. This is not reflected by the by the central state, the central state anyway does not have the power, the resources, the and the political will to give us adequate support if we bring it under local municipal control, then if we increase our tax revenues or something like that, we will have more executive power over running it. So that is the logic. I'm telling this story. It's a very old story. It's a 30-year-old story. Why I'm telling it is because it prefigures a lot of what we see later on.

When I started doing ethnographic fieldwork in the aftermath of the Maidan revolution in Ukraine, so there was already a war in the eastern borders. And it was already war. And this, of course, changed the stakes of cultural politics and heritage politics as well. And what I could see very strongly was a sort of attempt of local professionals, whether they were in based in NGO's. Or in offices of the local, state or wherever. There was an attempt to bypass the central state because the central state still did not have much to offer in terms of either funding or even the kind of professional presence that they would need to make decisions they would need. For example, if a building in the UNESCO World Heritage type was to be renovated because it's a site of national significance, it has to be OK-ed by the central state, it usually comes with visits from staff from the Ministry of Culture and things like that. These processes are really quite cumbersome. They often get halted midway and the people in the local state in the municipal offices were growing increasingly frustrated with what they perceived was the kind of sabotaging of their work, and instead they started to look elsewhere and this is where the expansion of the European cultural diplomacy sector if we want to interpret it like that or essentially European funds and institutional presence started to be much more prominent in Ukraine, and this and western Ukraine, and with it, Lviv was one of the frontiers of this change.

So what you would see is that from 2009 onwards, Ukraine was eligible for the EU's Eastern Partnership Funds. All of these grand schemes like Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, the Polish Ministry of Culture, had several projects Lviv used to be part of Poland for several centuries. So obviously there is a geopolitical angle to this France from Germany, France from Austria. So basically, regional funding started to be available in in a way that's not uncomparable to what had been the case in the in the 90S and people in these local offices started to increasingly rely on this as a way to circumvent, bypass or sometimes pressure the central state.

So what you see is that this is of course something that changes the power balance between, you know, who gets to do what. It pushes the significance and the presence of civil society organisations or public private partnerships. This comes with skills including language skills. This comes with new professional orientations. I think one of the under-studied aspects of these kinds of transformations, like the collapse of the USSR, is that your previous orders of legitimation, your previous networks become, if not immediately worthless, then at least marginal compared to what the current valuable type of knowledge and connections are. So, what you see is the really fast transformation where in the course of a generation or two at most, is a turnaround instead of those previous connections towards Saint Petersburg or Moscow. What you have now is connections to Krakow, to Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, Brussels. And so on and so on. And this is of course something that's reflected in what is considered good restoration or good management, what kind of practises are favoured. This of course links Ukraine into this broader transformation of heritage management towards a much more community-driven, grassroots enterprise than what it had been when it was all about monument conservation in the 70s and 80s. Lviv is interesting because this is where it has happened in the most prominent and spectacular way. It's not the only place where it happened.

With this I want to come to the years that precede the current full-scale war. Because Ukraine sort of recovered economically by the early 2000s, but by the time it properly recovered the world financial crisis hit by the time that was over, there was the Maidan revolution and the war started, which was a huge drain on the economy with two millions, sometimes it's estimated there is 2 1/2 million, I don't know the exact number of people displaced and how family and people going through the army in the course of in the course of the next eight years. So this is a huge blow for the Ukrainian state and you see these kind of cycles of the State Building institutional capacity trying to enact reforms that there was a strong attempt at the decentralisation reform after the Maidan. But there's always some sort of crisis that halts that. And so what you see long-term is a protracted crisis as a sort of multi-generational precarity in all of these public cultural institutions. And because of that, a huge dependency on either foreign funding or civic fundraising, or whatever other means that could essentially take off some of the state's burdens.

This is, I think, illustrated really well by what happened when the war broke out in the Donbas. There were several museums and libraries archives that were occupied then de-occupied. And of course, the Ministry of Culture at that point said, OK, we have to do something. We have to assess the risk of escalation and figure out what kind of responses we would have if there is an escalation. For this, they organised a small group that was a sort of reformist faction in the ministry. That went around and was trying to understand what was happening on the ground. It was a kind of field expedition in in these regions, but again they faced basically the same problem that their Soviet era predecessors were facing. Their colleagues in the 90s were facing. There was no way to pressure the state into changing the budget for culture. There was no way to install things like cars that would be ready to evacuate collections in case of an escalation, or even just having packaging materials that you need for something like this. So what happened is that it was left to museum directors' or library directors' own discretion to find the funds to do something. There were training sessions organised, there was communication from the ministry that requested the priority list of objects that would need to be evacuated in case of an escalation. But these are all measures that could be characterised as cheap. They were all things you can do without funds. There were never interventions that were centralised and budgeted in that way.

So the responsibility gets individualised and gets pushed down. On the one hand. But on the other hand, it also stays with the central state in the sense that when disaster happens, they will be accountable for not fulfilling their mandate, which is something that we see a lot right now. From spring 2021 all the way to the full-scale invasion, there was this protracted build-up of Russian troops along the border, and there was a lot of uncertainty, especially in the last three months. There was a lot of uncertainty about what kind of escalation will happen when there was no communication in the level of ministers and vice ministers, this is what I know for sure. Of course, there might have been something more, something clear in the in the Presidential Office, but already not in the ministerial level. And because of that, when people would be calling asking whether they need to prepare, how and so on and so on. This was not really dealt with in a sort of centralised fashion. There was no policy to be prepared. People didn't want to incite panic.

This is not unique to Ukraine as far as I could see, parallel cases of war starting all over the place in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Yemen, I checked these cases. I checked also different European countries as they entered the Second World War. And this is always the case that there is this discourse around avoiding panic, and because of that, there is often a lack of communication of or for security threats, or institutions are often left with this kind of improvisatory measures. A lot of these people, these professionals in leadership positions that I spoke to reported that there was maybe communication along the lines of do prepare your priority list, do know how and what to evacuate. But there was

often a discourse that would discourage people from dismantling collections, for example, or packing away books prior to the invasion because it was in a sense, I think, it's about not being able to afford risks. In many, many sense of the terms, what you see here, I think is that with the with the individualization of this, with this sort of pushing down the risk while keeping the centralised structures bureaucratic structures, people are between the rock and the hard place. If they evacuate at that point, they often have to do it without adequate equipment or without legal backup. If they don't, then they are also held responsible. It's a kind of really difficult situation to be in and this is where I'd like to come back to this question of what the state is and what it does. And the division of labour between them and others.

What's really interesting, I think, is that Ukraine, because of the experience of the of the Maidan revolution in 2013-14, had very recent experience of fast spontaneous civic mobilisation. There were millions of people participating, especially in the middle class, but not only in that revolution and in the aftermath of that, when it turned out that the Ukrainian army was not prepared, lacked the funds to equip the soldiers that were or the volunteer fighters that were going to the Donbas war, which was then called the anti-terrorist operation. Many, many people came together and founded smaller or bigger civil society organisations that set out to fill these gaps that the state could not fill. This experience in the military in and around the military is something that was most prominent in that sector and also, to a lesser extent, in the help organised for displaced people. Then in 2022, with the full-scale invasion, this is the kind of experience that became the model of mobilisation, civic mobilisation on all fronts, and why this is interesting is because although the state retains the monopoly over recognising managing heritage and so on and so on. They not only lack the resources, human resources and financial resources, but they also are operating according to a really complex, tight and cumbersome bureaucracy that is not designed to be able to respond fast enough. With the speed of the ground offensive, if I may say that way. So by the time you get your permit to move your collection, which is always from the central state. You are possibly already occupied. In my interviews this has come up a lot that essentially this was one of the bottlenecks.

What happens is a very specific and interesting form of mobilisation, which is, I don't think it should be described as civil society mobilisation in the usual way and the reason for that is because. At least in the heritage sector, because you need to cooperate with the state, the people who end up running the most successful initiatives are state employees, so Heads of archives or museum directors or people in similar positions, often even officials in territorial administration or something like that. They would establish a small NGO and the personal overlap. So the fact that they are both public sector employees and civil society leaders, that ensures the relatively smooth cooperation between state and non-state actors. What do I mean by this? For example, if you are a school public theatre, a museum, a library. You cannot receive funding from, let's say, a foreign civil society or even a foreign state actor, or UNESCO or whatever. You can't receive that funding in a relatively easy and straightforward fashion. It takes weeks, sometimes months, to get it through the system. And how you can spend it is really heavily curtailed by the fact that you are a public organisation and how you operate is under very strong public scrutiny embedded in a very complicated bureaucracy. So what you then have is that de facto the NGO or the charitable organisation that is set up by people who are already in these state organisations becomes the agile part of the institution that can participate in this sort of fast decision making and can take funds, can pay out funds, can operate, can procure for example boxes or vehicles quickly. You can't do that if you are not like that, but because of the personal overlap, there is a direct communication. And this is the kind of mobilisation that I find the most typical. And I've been thinking a lot about sort of adequate way of framing this and what's specific about it is that it's a professional-led, professional-driven mobilisation, but it is still a grassroots mobilisation. It does, in a sense, supplement the states work in a in a sense it acts also as a

series of or a matrix of the organisations that put increasing pressure on the state, figuring out to what extent they do their job; when they don't do their job they push for increasing transparency, they push for more accountability in these processes, but at the same time they can't do their work without the state. They can't do their work without receiving these permits without essentially getting green light.

This is a wartime phenomenon, but this is not something that's unique to this war. This is something that we see obviously in other countries as well in non-war context as well. And I think it tells us something about bureaucracy in general and how bureaucracies could maybe be changed to take off some of the burden from state decision making in these contexts where fast action is needed. It's also something that comes with a sort of competition that is often full of frictions because states need these funds, states need the foreign funding. This is especially on the higher level, like for example UNESCO support or the EU as an intergovernmental actor. They would often first come to nation states, but recognising what is happening, what we see is also a quite unprecedented change in this. So what you see is, instead, intergovernmental actors like the EU or large actors like nation states increasingly look at alternatives to state parties. In the context of this war, one such example is that instead of working with the Ukrainian state in the very first month of the war, the EU gave 2 million euros to a foundation called Alive, which is an international NGO that was established in response to the war in Iraq and in Syria. They act very fast. This is basically their specialty of appearing on the ground, immediately distributing funds without this kind of bureaucratic measures that would be typical of state actors. They were there on the ground in Ukraine before larger organisations like UNESCO or Human Fund or other bigger actors appeared. I don't know if this is a tendency, but what you see through this I think is this larger change or this kind of in a sense, I think this crisis in how the heritage sector is organised globally. This tension between state-led institutional forms and modus operandi and towards a more direct often community-driven other vision of dealing with this.

I don't think that this is a question of good and bad. This is a question where you see basically this clashing. Ukrainian state was, of course, very indignant about this. But because they themselves are in a dependent position in the war economy, unable to get the resources for culture that they would need to operate to fulfil their mandate. In a sense, they are in a weak position. They couldn't contest this. And on the images I have this picture from, also from Lviv. This is the Organisation Museum Crisis Centre that was set up by a museum director to provide help to mostly smaller local and regional museums. And they're on the map. You can see how many museums they support in each of these in each of the regions, each of the counties in Ukraine. By now, I think they are somewhere around €200,000 of aid distributed. This is often even humanitarian aid, just food and hygiene products to museum professionals, because often the daily survival of people closer to the frontline is just not insured at all, and sometimes it's equipment for evacuations and for the preservation of dismantling of collections. So this is one of the examples of this organisation type that I've discussed. So yeah. And this is what I think I need to theorise a little bit better and to understand how to reconcile the role of expert communities and expert networks with this broader picture of grassroots mobilisation and how all of this ultimately provides a sort of challenge and help simultaneously to the functioning of the state. Thank you very much.