

Letter to the members of the World Heritage Committee from UNESCO National Commissions for UNESCO.

Distinguished members of the World Heritage Committee,

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched an armed offensive against Ukraine.

More than a month later, intense fighting continues, with thousands of lives lost and buildings and sometimes entire cities devastated. According to the figures recently released by the UNESCO Secretariat, 53 cultural buildings (historical monuments, places of worship, libraries, etc.) had been damaged or destroyed by 31 March. It is likely that the figures have since risen. The heritage of Kharkiv, a UNESCO Creative City, paid a particularly heavy price, as did the centre of Chernihiv, which is on Ukraine's tentative World Heritage List. The terrible images of the bombing of the Mariupol theatre and the unfolding horrors in Bucha and Borodyanka whilst under occupation along with other villages, towns and cities, attested by UNESCO and others through satellite imagery, weigh particularly heavily in our minds. And the damage continues.

Article 6.3 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention states that "Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention."

As by the Charter of National Commissions for UNESCO of 1978, their function "is to involve in UNESCO's activities the various ministerial departments, agencies, institutions, organizations and individuals working for the advancement of education, science, culture and information, so that each Member State may contribute to the maintenance of peace and security and the common welfare of mankind ..."

The signatory National Commissions for UNESCO deem it is impossible for the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee to be held either in Kazan or under Russian presidency while the latter is destroying "outstanding universal value" in Ukraine. The credibility of UNESCO and the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage is at stake.

Given these circumstances, the signatory National Commissions for UNESCO of this letter, whose States are all States Parties to the 1972 Convention, will not travel to Kazan or to a 45th session of the World Heritage Committee hosted in any other country if chaired by Russia.

However, we believe firmly that the important work of listing and protecting World Heritage should continue, despite the Russian offensive in Ukraine, and we do not therefore want to see the 45th session postponed. This is a particularly important meeting of the Committee, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Convention, and which should launch a whole new focus on heritage in Africa in particular. These are important discussions that should take place in conditions that allow all States Parties to give them due focus and attention.

We look to you as our elected representatives on the World Heritage Committee to consider these arguments as you take forward your responsibilities on behalf of the Convention.

Yours ever,

The National Commissions for UNESCO of

Albania, Andorra, Aruba, Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Curaçao, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Faroes, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, New Zealand, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, South Korea, St Maarten, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom

Cc : Lazare Eloundou Assomo, Director World Heritage Centre

ICOMOS : Teresa Patricio, President of the Board, International Council on Monuments and Sites (secretariat@icomos.org) – please share with your Board

ICCROM : John Robbins, Chair, International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property – please share with your General Assembly (iccrom@iccrom.org)

IUCN : International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Ryazan Al Mubarak, President of the Council (please share with your Council)

ICOM : International Council of Museums, Alberto Garlandini, President - please share with your board – secretariat@icom.museum