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## **Museums in Ukraine: fighting for survival and winning the future – a Polish Perspective**

Sweden has enjoyed centuries of peace with its neighbors. Among the last wars Sweden fought were the Thirty-Years-War and the Great Nordic War. Both were fought to a good part on Polish and even Ukrainian soil. This somewhat surprising introduction might explain an important difference when it comes to the Ukrainian and Polish experience: In this part of Europe, over centuries wars were a constant and awful companion.

Together, Europeans had hoped that, with the peaceful revolutions of 1989, peace and freedom would become a lasting experience also in the middle of Europe. However, Ukrainians and Poles might have had a more realistic understanding than others of what the future with a neighbor like Russia might bring.

Since 1989 Poles and Germans succeeded building up a relationship that finally turned enemies into partners. Polish – German relations still have their hick-ups. It remains to be a challenge to overcome sometimes diverging views on important topics - not only some aspects of our history, but also topics like defence and security, environmental protection or our understanding of the working together in the European Union.

Ukraine and Poland also have their difficult issues from a complex, sometimes controversial history. A good part of what today is Ukraine for centuries used to belong to Poland - not always to the liking of the local population. But as countries like Ireland and UK or Germany and Poland had to find a way into a better future, Ukraine and Poland need to build the fundamentals to do the same. However, in both countries you still find people who prefer to use old conflicts for today's internal political benefits.

### **Russia's war: a war about destroying Ukraine's culture and identity**

When Russia launched the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – after having started this war already in 2014 by annexing the Crimea peninsula and parts of the Donbas region – it became even more important to support museums in Ukraine in their fight against destruction, robberies and, at the same time, for a future where

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museums play an important role to strengthen a free society. Culture has evolved from sometimes simple entertainment into an essential aspect of human life. It aids individuals by nourishing their sanity during these difficult and tragic times and by restoring a sense of dignity amidst the instinctual urge for self-preservation that prevails in wartime. The Ukrainian culture shapes the national identity, helping Ukrainians to clearly distinguish themselves from the Russian imperial culture. Culture has become nothing less than a crucial component of the Ukrainian security framework to quote Andrij Lubka, a Ukrainian poet and writer.

War is first and foremost about destruction. From the very first moments of the full-scale invasion, it was clear that Russians were not just targeting the Ukrainian army. Russia's war not only aims at conquering Ukraine but also at annihilating the Ukrainian identity. Therefore, the countless destructions of Ukrainian art and culture are not collateral damage but a core part of Russian warfare. As of this May, already 1,046 cultural sites were systematically destroyed or damaged.

Wherever Russia can, museum artefacts are robbed and carried away. In Crimea and the occupied Donbas region, Russia replaces former exhibitions with well-prepared propaganda exhibitions telling the story that Ukrainians are Russians and that 'Mother Russia' is always right.

Just one example: Before Russia had to give up the conquered city of Kherson, it had all artefacts from the important local museum being packed in trucks and brought away.

As the director of this museum told: They even took the felt slippers for visitors with them, leaving behind only a bust of Lenin. Obviously, there are still enough Lenin busts in Russia.

Russia is also systematically hunting museum employees in the currently occupied Ukrainian territories. Often, the mayor and the director of the local museum are the first ones to be arrested, making this war a war of cultural destruction.

Ukrainian and Polish museum professionals encounter similar dilemmas, shaped by a shared history of war: the Holocaust, forced expulsions, Nazi atrocities, and Russian authoritarianism. Ukrainians, Belorussians and Poles were the three victims hit hardest by German atrocities during World War II. But Poland was freer to restore its identity after the war. After 1989, Poland enjoyed a huge advantage over the newly independent Ukraine: As member of the European Union and NATO, Poland was able to build up a democratic society. This helped to become the one country in Europe with the highest economic growth rate ever since. Poland and, e. g., the Baltic Republics enjoyed tremendous support by its EU-neighbors and international investors, helping Poland to get where it is today. New partnerships were also very helpful for museums in Poland to get through the transformation.

### **Western elites and East European perspectives**

But it is also true that the 'newcomers' from the East were sometimes met with arrogance, not least among the cultural elites in Western Europe. They had – and

have – their own topics and sometimes don't understand why people in the Eastern parts of Europe have a different look at these topics: For good reasons the colonial past of many European countries has become a much-debated topic, being reflected in many museums' exhibitions. However, why does the dealing with the colonial past of Europe not include the fact that we still have a colonial power in Europe, namely Russia? Reflecting the continued colonial and imperialistic nature of Russian politics and challenging the fact that some West European elites denied and neglected the crimes committed by Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation today is still a topic where you find different perspectives between Western and East European elites.

Fighting aspects of discrimination in our own societies, as another example, needs to include the fighting against the day-to-day horrors brought about by Russia, because the Russian government and the majority of the Russian population don't want to accept that Ukrainians want to be independent from Russian discrimination.

It needs to be reminded that showing 'solidarity' with people far away is good, but Ukrainians deserve the same solidarity. To understand how Ukrainians feel, being threatened by death each single day, requires asking the question whether all Europeans understand the nature of the fight for survival - also for cultural survival – Ukrainians are fighting today.

## **The role of museums in Ukraine**

Ukraine has a very rich cultural tradition and an impressive and lively cultural scene. In each country museums play an important role:

- They show where we come from.
- They offer a base to experience today's world.
- They provide a forum to discuss what people want to achieve and who they want to become.

In a dictatorship, in which Poles and Ukrainians lived and Russians still have to live, museums are transmission belts of the governments doctrine: They only show you what the government wants you to see and think.

In an open society, museums are part of the civil society. Therefore, they question the way a society perceives the world and they offer the freedom to come to own conclusions.

In times of war, culture has several roles to play:

- to preserve collections, monuments and sites of historical significance
- from the first minutes of the war, to be Ukraine's voice to the world, also being the voice of the witnesses of crimes.
- for every cultural institution to become a place to reflect on the common experience and, very importantly, on the common vision for the future; thereby to be a place where people remember, think, share and imagine something that is common for them.

Museums in Ukraine are in the transition from the transition-belt-past to the open-society-approach. Meanwhile, an impressive number of museum employees

understand what a museum should be about – regardless of whether it is a museum of national or local history, of technology, of arts, of literature or whatever. Already before the war these employees had significantly changed the way museums work. They are hungry for new concepts and also for international exchange.

These international contacts are a two-way-street, not a one-sided affair: Ukraine has much to give to the world: an old culture, own experiences, new concepts and lessons to be learnt outside of Ukraine.

In the second year of war, 73 percent more books were published in Ukraine. The government not only increased the unavoidable spending on defence but also on culture: Ukrainians understand that culture is essential in many ways. Of course, spending time in a museum or theatre or reading a book can be a necessary distraction from every day's horror. But it is about more: In a time of deadly threats culture reminds you why it is worth living and fighting. Poles do understand this easily: Under the four partitions of Poland (1772, 1792, 1795 and 1939) when Poland had been raised from the political map of Europe, it was the culture that helped Poles to remain Poles, to defend what Polish culture had to offer to the world and, yes, even to die: When Poles fought in the several insurrections against occupation and suppression their slogan was: "for our and your freedom". 'Freedom' meant more than political freedom and independence. It was about to be free to live the way you personally and as a nation want to live. The history of our region, including the history of Ukraine in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, shows that, based on culture, such a community can survive for a long time even without a national state. Therefore, the fight for Ukrainian's freedom is also about culture. Ukrainians today are fighting for their and our freedom.

### **OБMИH's mission for museums in times of war**

Foundation OБMИH serves as a platform, today already for over 150 museums from all parts of Ukraine and of all sorts of museums. And the number keeps growing. This makes OБMИH the largest network of Ukrainian museums. Of course, there are many more museums, many of them small museums in towns and villages, often depicting aspects of local tradition, history and life.

It is impressive to observe how much interest there is to better understand where Ukrainians in all their diversity come from and how Ukraine became the country it is today. Ukrainians learnt to embrace their diversity: be it ethnic backgrounds like Crimean Tartars, people in the Western mountain regions, people of Russian or Polish descendance, religious diversities: Orthodox – now being split into two churches -, Ukrainian Greek Catholics or Jews – to name just a few of Ukraine's rich diversities.

Museums, even more since the war started in 2014, are concentrating on topics around questions like:

- Where did people in Ukraine come from?
- What do arts and culture in Ukraine mean today?
- How to build an even better Ukraine in the future?
- How museums can help to deal with the horrors of this war?

In the Ukrainian language 'obmin' means 'exchange'. Fundacja OBMIN was founded in 2022 with 3 key objectives:

- short-term: targeting support and survival aid for Ukrainian museums and their employees - to help those, who stay and continue working.
- mid-term: creating networks inside of Ukraine and outside
- mid- and long-term: promoting the knowledge and understanding of Ukrainian art and culture outside of Ukraine as part of the common European cultural heritage.

## 10 Proposals for the Reconstruction of Ukraine

In an OBMIN- conference last year, over hundred Ukrainian museums agreed on a position paper describing these challenges and offering solutions for the way ahead. Their impressive "10 Fundamental Principles" for the Reconstruction of Ukraine include<sup>2</sup>:

1. *Rebuilding Ukraine requires thinking about how we want to perceive Ukraine in the future: preserving what was valuable and improving what makes our country an even better place to live, work or visit. Planning at national, regional and local levels should better include civil society and cultural institutions, especially museums, from the outset.*
2. *The reconstruction of Ukraine will make it a much more inclusive society: this becomes especially obvious when we think about how we will make life easier for those of our people who are suffering from the physical or psychological consequences of this war. Making Ukraine the best country in the world for people with disabilities is a positive challenge.*
3. *Rebuilding Ukraine will bring new narratives: both within Ukraine and beyond. Museums can make an important contribution. ...The reconstruction of Ukraine must include a self-reflection on what museums we have today at national, regional and local level, and what museums we would like to see in the future in order to better present what made Ukraine the country it is today.*

*This discussion should also go beyond Ukraine: outside of Ukraine too often we are still faced with ignorance or misunderstanding of Ukrainian art and culture, either not showing anything related to Ukraine in museum exhibitions, or neglecting the Ukrainian element in a work of art or an artist's biography. Therefore, we call for a systematic dialogue with museums outside of Ukraine for a better display of this common heritage.*

4. *Rebuilding Ukraine requires a program of modernization and professionalization for many of our museums. Museums should step into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rebuilding Ukraine is an opportunity to turn museums in Ukraine into the most modern, most visitor-oriented in the world. ...Our societies are evolving, technologies are developing, narratives are changing – all of this creates new opportunities. Ukraine should become the driver of such a museum modernization requiring a*

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<sup>2</sup> For the full text see: [www.obmin.eu](http://www.obmin.eu)

*constant increase in the expertise of museum professionals.*

5. *While rebuilding Ukraine, it is necessary to preserve what is good and strong in our country. This includes our often rather small local and regional museums. They are close to people and to the needs of their communities. ...We propose to create a national fund of small and medium-sized local and regional museums, which could be financed by private benefactors in Ukraine and abroad.*
6. *Rebuilding Ukraine must be visible both inside the country and beyond. Therefore, we propose to create exhibitions and interdisciplinary platforms that will reflect various elements of the reconstruction of Ukraine, to demonstrate them in various locations both in the country and abroad.*
7. *The reconstruction of Ukraine will largely depend on the youth. That is why we offer special programs and concepts for young people in Ukraine. ...More and better online museum activities would make this possible wherever young people in Ukraine need such access. In tomorrow's Ukraine, having full access to our rich culture and heritage should no longer depend on where you live or whether you can afford to travel to big cities with big museums.*
8. *The reconstruction of Ukraine should have a special European aspect. Ukraine will become a member of the European Union. We need to think about how to bring Ukraine closer to other Europeans. This may include the establishment of Ukrainian museums in other parts of Europe. It could also mean using modern technologies to better present Ukraine to Europe. The European Union and Ukraine are called upon to create such an initiative, providing suggestions on how best to achieve this.*
9. *Rebuilding Ukraine must include a security aspect, specifically in the domain of cultural heritage. Awareness of a wide range of permanent threats, from wars to natural and man-made disasters, should form the basis of developing a clear roadmap for preserving the historical and cultural heritage that museums concentrate.*
10. *Reconstruction of Ukraine should cover all aspects of history, art and culture. Therefore, we ask international donors, governments and private institutions to include history, art and culture in their concepts to support the reconstruction of Ukraine. We ask them to involve museums and other institutions of civil society in the creation and implementation of their programs. Museums are important partners in making Ukraine a role model for what a society can achieve by advocating freedom in all its aspects.*

These proposals had long been debated among the Ukrainian museum experts in online workshops organized by OBMIN. The paper demonstrates that Ukrainian museums want to look ahead and prepare themselves for the time to come.

## **visions for the postwar future of museums**

Surprisingly however,

- Museums in Ukraine are doing much more than to save collections or fix damaged buildings.
- They actively deal with the question of how to further develop museums and to respond to changed expectations by the people in Ukraine.

Here are some examples:

- Museums offer exhibitions and discussions on different aspects of this war.
- Museums offer special events for soldiers during their holidays from fighting.
- Museums invite people with different traumata.
- Museums start to understand that they have to do much more to become more inclusive, e. g. for wounded civilians and soldiers - be it wheelchair access, be it ways for blind or deaf people to experience an exhibition or to include disabled artists offering them a way to express themselves.
- Last, but not least, museums, already today, are working upon what people in Ukraine expect from museums after the war - including the question how museums can support the strengthening of democracy, the fighting of corruption and oligarchy and making offers as a platform to discuss how to build an even better Ukraine.

In 2025 the Ukrainian museums agreed on a second position paper „How to Live with Our Past – How to Build Our Future”.<sup>3</sup> Here they describe essential aspects for their future work. It speaks for the museums in Ukraine how much they reflect on the responsibility museums have for the future of Ukraine and how much they need to challenge their own way of thinking and working in order to meet this responsibility:

1. *History is who we are today; the future is what we can create today. What we place in a museum reflects our vision of the past, what we wish to discuss today, and what we want to preserve for future generations. ... We cannot choose our history, but it's up to us how we reflect it and whether we allow it to hold us captive or use our experience to build a better future. ... Today, museum work requires courage to present not only achievements but also difficult, even unpleasant pages of the past. Only a society that can honestly acknowledge its mistakes can create a stable foundation for the future. Museums become a place where society learns not to avoid challenges but to accept history as it is—with complex questions and important lessons.*
2. *Let's look at the past anew. To build an even better Ukraine - during and after the current war imposed by Russia - Ukrainian museums must rethink how we deal with the past and what museums should offer to foster debate about the future of Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation. ... Ukraine is a rich and diverse country, where people have different experiences and histories: being Ukrainian, like other nations, does not mean being monolithic. ... Museums must also respond to challenges arising from destruction and looting during the war. This requires museum workers not only to preserve artifacts but also to actively rethink narratives related to our history and culture, turning these artifacts into a source of strength and support for modern society. ...*

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<sup>3</sup> Full text on: [www.obmin.eu](http://www.obmin.eu)

*Ukrainian museums must be united by one narrative: we have always aspired to freedom and independence. They must show that despite our country's multinational nature, the aspiration for freedom has always united us.*

3. *Decolonizing museums is essential for our self-understanding.*

*The periods when Ukrainians could freely live their identity and reflect on how they wanted to live were brief. Ukrainians share a common trait with many peoples who have experienced both enrichment and subjugation by other nations—whether from the South, East, West, or North. Whether we like it or not, this has become part of our history and culture. ...*

*However, we must understand where this influence helps us move forward and build a free and open society and where it complicates building our future.*

*For these reasons, people around the world have discussed the need for decolonization in conquered nations for decades. Ukraine exemplifies this necessity: today, Russia openly declares its goal to destroy Ukrainian identity and culture.*

*During Tsarist and Soviet times, Russia imposed its understanding of history and culture on Ukraine. During World War II, Nazi Germany sought to eliminate the Ukrainian nation and turn Ukraine into an agricultural colony. Poland and Ukraine share a common history that has sometimes been complex and painful for both sides. The Crimean Tatars on the Crimean Peninsula constantly faced threats to their identity.*

4. *Decolonization of museums begins with tough questions to ourselves.*

*We can learn from other nations what it means to professionally decolonize museums. What has been placed in museums - and what has not - is inherently a reflection of what those who made decisions considered important. Thus, museum exhibits inevitably demonstrate the thinking of predecessors and, accordingly, will reflect our thinking on what we want to convey to future generations of Ukrainians. ...*

*Rethinking totalitarian heritage in Ukrainian museums is an important step in the decolonization process. Instead of destroying or hiding evidence of the past, we must find a way to integrate these elements into new narratives showing how propaganda and totalitarian systems influenced all spheres of society. Many collections in our museums hold items that once served colonial narratives. However, they may have different meanings today—through the lens of critical analysis. ...*

*Museums have a unique opportunity to help society understand and rethink a difficult past.*

5. *Decolonization includes learning to live with our past.*

*In a free and open society, there is no official doctrine on how to view our heritage. Different people and groups have their own ways of seeing this heritage - sometimes simply adding new shades to our shared understanding, sometimes highlighting different perceptions and interpretations. These discussions can be painful and cause conflict, especially when the topic is relevant today. ...*

*It is essential to openly acknowledge that part of Ukrainians, having lived under Soviet occupation for almost 70 years, adapted to the totalitarian regime, adjusting to new realities. ...*

*Museums, as part of public space, can play an essential role in this process, presenting exhibits with different viewpoints and creating spaces for discussions where*

*different interpretations can coexist.*

6. *Openly discuss how we want to decolonize our museums. Inclusive discussion about what and how to display in museums requires transparent analysis in each case and open discussion on how we want to build museums for future generations -including acknowledging that future generations will look not only at our past but also at what we did in our lifetime. ...Open dialogue about decolonizing museums allows for a multifaceted, critical understanding of history, which will foster awareness of the richness of Ukrainian culture and strengthen national identity.*
7. *Decolonization is living with complexity. Part of the richness of our history and culture lies in the fact that we, as a nation, have been shaped by the principle of “out of many- one” as the founders of the United States put it. Museums should critically examine this fundamental concept of an open society and include this principle of accepting complexity as part of our identity in the future presentation of their collections.*
8. *Decolonization means living with unresolved conflicts. Regarding our own history, our neighbors, and our beliefs, Ukrainian museums must also deal with situations where we cannot agree on important issues. As a result of our shared history, as well as after this horrific war, we must find a way to live with Russia and the fact that many Ukrainians have diverse family histories. This will be challenging for many. Museums have a responsibility to help address this challenge. ... For Ukraine, it is also important to continue dialogue with neighboring countries, like Poland, with whom there are many shared historical chapters. ... Ukrainian museums must not only document current events but also create spaces that will allow future generations to better understand and appreciate their experience. History must be shown in full, with all its complexities and contradictions, so that future generations can draw conclusions and appreciate the richness of the past.*
9. *Learning from others. Ukrainian museums must find their own way to address modern challenges, but at the same time, we can learn from others, as we are not the first nor the only ones undergoing a transformation of cultural policy. Post-Soviet societies in Europe face similar challenges, and their experience can be a source of inspiration for us. For instance, museums in the Baltic countries, such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, demonstrate successful examples of integrating Soviet heritage into the national narrative without losing their identity. They develop approaches that help turn complex and conflicting topics into meaningful and positive discussions that engage society in rethinking its history. In the United States, we can find museums that integrate various, often conflicting, narratives, such as those involving Native Americans, African Americans, and white Americans. They show the importance of finding common ground between different stories and representing them in museum exhibits to create space for dialogue. This approach can teach Ukrainian museums how to present different perspectives on historical events without oversimplifying the complexity of the topic, instead creating*

*multi-faceted narratives.*

*Africa and Asia also show successful examples of innovative museums that represent colonial and postcolonial history, art, and culture. These museums work on creating new narratives that take into account the legacy of the colonial era and its impact on modern societies.*

*10. Explaining our colonial experience beyond Ukraine.*

*For the future of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, it is essential that those outside Ukraine understand that Ukraine is a victim of colonialism and that those fighting against colonialism and its consequences should support Ukraine in its struggle. ...*

*Museums will use their international networks to expand understanding of Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty and identity. ...*

*By creating exhibitions and international partnerships, Ukrainian museums can and should convey to the global community that Ukraine's current struggle is part of the global movement against colonialism.*

## **Polish-Ukrainian cooperation in the museum sector**

The cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian museums is often thought to be well developed and intense. However, this isn't the case as much as one should wish, for several reasons:

During the eight years of the former national-conservative government, Poland was impressively quick to respond to military needs of Ukraine. At the same time, Poland increased its investment into its own defence, now reaching more than 4 per cent of GDP.

Yet it is true to state that our complex joint history, in particular during and after World War II, was and sometimes is instrumentalized, leading to block urgently needed support for Ukraine today. Some want to talk more about our past than about Ukraine's and Poland's joint future in a united Europe. This restricts the possibilities of museums in both countries to really cooperate.

Just one example: It takes time and effort to establish a cooperation between the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk and the Museum of War in Kyiv, even though these two museums are the perfect fit to each other.

## **OБMИH's contribution**

With a small team of only four fixed employees plus a few freelancers OБMИH succeeded over the last three years in building up a close network both within Ukraine and outside:

The Ukrainian Ministry of Culture just honored OБMИH to be the first institution with a Memorandum to define what OБMИH should do in Ukraine's interest. This is a strong proof of trust from the Ukrainian partners.

OБMИH started with supporting museums to survive – not only with building material, laptops or professional cameras to digitalize their artefacts. OБMИH also supports museum employees with grants, helping them to survive and to continue to do their job. This even includes museums from currently occupied territories, having been

relocated to other parts of Ukraine. In case of specific need this support is still being provided.

Yet, today OBMIN concentrates on supporting museums in their mid- and long-term needs:

- running biweekly online workshops – sometimes with up to 300 participants in Ukraine – on topics the museums choose, from how to digitalize artefacts, to dealing with traumatized visitors and employees.
- organizing conferences with Ukrainian museums and international partners. The next one will take place on June 26/27 in Warsaw with over 150 participants. There museums experts discuss topics they decided upon and prepare joint positions for their own future work, introducing their proposals into the work of the Ukrainian government and international institutions.
- preparing joint proposals for the next Ukraine Recovery Conference this July in Rome.

All this can only be done thanks to many partners, private and government institutions.

The next conference in June will be under the patronage of five governments: Ukraine, France, Italy, Germany and Poland. In addition, OBMIN cooperates with a growing number of private partners – in particular several national and international foundations. This support is crucial for museums in Ukraine to thrive, even in times of war.

In our partnership with the Gerda Henkel Foundation in Düsseldorf OBMIN supports several projects. One of them dealt with an archeological excavation at the Khortytsia island in the Dnipro river: After the important Dnipro dam, further South the river, had been destroyed by the Russian army much land felt dry up the river. This still is an environmental disaster but it enabled to dig for important artefacts from the early Cossack times. GHS also enabled micro-stipends for museum employees, even in currently occupied territories, allowing them to continue their work under most difficult circumstances.

Another cooperation has been established with NEMO, the Network of European Museum Organisation: Nemo now offers free membership for 5 Ukrainian museums each year, enabling them to largen their international contacts.

The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung preußischer Kulturbesitz), Germany's biggest public cultural foundation, generously helped to run OBMIN's conference in May 2024 on the beautiful Museum Island in Berlin. This led to introduce the importance of culture into the series of Ukraine Recovery Conferences. Thereby again this year culture will be a topic at the Ukraine Recovery Conference in July in Rome (URC 2025) where the results of OBMIN's pre-conference this June will be introduced. This is part of the cultural diplomacy support OBMIN provides to Ukraine as part of the Memorandum signed in April by the Ukrainian Minister of Culture and OBMIN. OBMIN introduces proposals of Ukrainians museums also at

other occasions, e. g. at the 'Café Kyiv' events in Berlin, organized by the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, which has turned into the single biggest cultural and political event for Ukraine outside of Ukraine with thousands of participants each year.

Part of the cultural diplomacy activities of OBMIN is the membership in the Platform for the Reconstruction in Ukraine (Plattform Wiederaufbau Ukraine), bringing together many pro-Ukrainian institutions and initiatives in Germany. OBMIN is interested to enlarge these kinds of international cooperation ever further. The new cooperation in Sweden is a good example for this openness.

The Solidarity Fund in Warsaw contributed to an OBMIN program to digitalize inventories of museums in Ukraine – an important task because it allows to better identify artefacts when having been robbed by Russia. At the same time, this is a good example that modernizing the way museums work is a necessary task anyhow. Digitalization is part of what museums around the world need to do anyhow. In the case of Ukraine, to digitalize artefacts opens the opportunity for museums to continue being accessible for the public via online exhibitions, even if museums have to be closed. Digitalization also allows a wider public to profit from what museums offer: You can visit them online even if you can't travel there.

All these activities are launched by OBMIN built on prior discussions with the museums involved in a specific project, in cooperation with the Ukraine Institute in Berlin and in line with the priorities of the Ukrainian Ministry for Culture and Strategic Communication. This way of working allows Ukrainian museums to strengthen their internal networks. It is impressive to experience how much importance museum employees give to exchange with colleagues facing similar challenges. Many, mainly small regional museums were lacking these contacts prior to the war. Therefore, supporting museums to build up their own structures in Ukraine isn't just a side-effect of OBMIN's work: It is an objective in itself: filling blind spots – the motto of OBMIN's mission. For museums to become a strong voice in and for the Ukrainian civil society requires them to acquire the necessary know-how. It also requires providing opportunities for Ukrainians to define what country they would like to have in a post-war future.

OBMIN's newest project is called 'Cultural Guardians: A Cross-Border Cultural Heritage Program': It will be launched this summer under the patronage of the Brandenburg Ministry for Science, Research and Culture. Partners will be the Association of Monument Protection Offices in German States (Vereinigung der Denkmalfachämter in den Ländern) and the Competence Network Interdisciplinary Ukrainian Studies at the Viadrina University Frankfurt/Oder (KIU Kompetenznetzwerk Interdisziplinäre Ukraine-Studien). This program will bring restoration experts from Ukraine first to Poland and then to Germany. In both countries they will meet with colleagues and spend internships at participating museums. Again, this initiative combines what is necessary for Ukrainian museums in times of war with what is anyhow necessary for the future after the war.

# OBMIN

Visiting Ukraine these days is a humbling experience: To see the energy, the determinations and – yes – the optimism of Ukrainians is more than just impressive. It is about experiencing the best what humans can do in awful times. It is about how to build the future – in Ukraine and for us all.