



CONFLICT OBSERVATORY

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Documenting the Appropriation of Cultural Assets from Kherson Art Museum

A Conflict Observatory Report

Compiled by: CURIA Lab

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Authorship and Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Multiple cultural institutions in the city of Kherson were reported to have been looted by Russian Federation Armed Forces or other Russian authorities in 2022. The best known of these is the Kherson Regional Art Museum (“the Museum”), which has stated that more than 11,000 of its around 14,000 cultural objects were forcibly removed during the Russian occupation of the city. Although there is a storage agreement between the Russian Ministry of Culture and the Central Museum of Taurida in occupied Simferopol for the handling of the cultural assets from the Kherson Regional Art Museum, the location of the vast majority of missing artworks has not been confirmed.

Using open source information, CURIA analysts documented what appears to have occurred and when, who appears to have been involved, and where the collection items appear to have been taken since their removal from the Museum. At the time of writing, Museum experts had reported the identification of at least 128 objects in the occupied territories of Ukraine, at least 127 of which were in the Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and at least one of which was in an educational institution in Henichesk, which is the administrative center of the occupied territories of Kherson Oblast.

CURIA analysts identified Museum reports that individually specified the identification of at least 109 of those objects, at least 101 of which were identified on the basis of accompanying images that could be compared by any viewer (while the others were identified on the basis of museum catalogue inventory numbers that could not). CURIA analysts also identified independent information that appeared to affirm Museum experts’ identification of at least 25 of those objects. Most significantly, our findings confirm the reported destination in Crimea of some of the “evacuated” objects from Kherson, thereby validating the findings of Ukraine’s museum workers.

We also documented information about the logistics of the operation that had been revealed after the completion of the Conflict Observatory’s rapid report in December 2022. It includes an evacuation order for cultural assets, a storage agreement under the authority of the Russian Ministry of Culture, and the confirmation of storage by the Central Museum of Taurida.

Our findings also bring into question several components of the Russian Federation’s narrative of the operation as a “rescue mission” justified by the Hague Convention’s instruction to move artworks in conflict zones out of harm’s way. The investigation may have implications for Ukrainian prosecutors’ efforts to seek claims for cultural heritage crime, specifically art theft. Consequently, another benefit of this investigation has been stable archiving of documentation that relates to the events under analysis.



About the Conflict Observatory

Who are the members of the Conflict Observatory?

The Conflict Observatory brings together subject matter experts in human rights, humanitarian law, communication, and open source and geospatial data analytics. Funded but not governed by the U.S. Department of State, the Conflict Observatory uses advanced technologies to independently document war crimes and other atrocities in Ukraine and Sudan.

What does the Conflict Observatory do?

The Conflict Observatory identifies, analyzes, and preserves possible evidence of atrocities that threaten people, places, resources, and cultural heritage sites. Using open-source documentation, very high resolution (VHR) satellite imagery, NASA thermal detection data, and/or geospatial data analysis, the Conflict Observatory documents evidence and maintains credible and verifiable digital records. The purpose of such records is to drive judicial accountability and transitional justice measures.

Introduction and Significance

The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation occupied Kherson between March 2, 2022, and November 11, 2022. Near the end of this period, most of the collection of the Kherson Regional Art Museum was removed. According to employees of the Museum, “more than 11,000” artworks were taken away.¹ Multiple reports suggest that the occupying forces carried out the removal.² The War and Art Database, which was being published by the National Agency of

¹ “більше 11 тисяч творів”, according to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023b.

² The persons reportedly responsible have variously been characterized as “the Russians” (according to, for example, Andreikovets and Mamonova, 2022; Bell and Semple, 2023; Espresso TV, 2024), “the invaders” (according to, for example, Espresso TV, 2024), “the occupiers” (according to, for example, Andreikovets and Mamonova, 2022), “the Russian occupiers” (according to, for example, Andreikovets and Mamonova, 2022), “Russian agents” (according to Gettleman and Mykolyshyn, 2023), “Russian soldiers” (according to, for example, Espresso TV, 2024; Nemtsova, 2023; PBS, 2022; the National Resistance Center of Ukraine, paraphrased by UAposition, 2023), “Russian troops” (according to, for example, PBS, 2022; the National Resistance Center of Ukraine, paraphrased by UAposition, 2023), “Russian forces” (according to, for example, Bell and Semple, 2023; Gettleman, J and Mykolyshyn, 2023; PBS, 2022; Solomon, 2024), “the Russian army” (i.e., Russian Federation Armed Forces) and/or “the Russian state” (according to, for example, PBS, 2022), with the assistance of the Russian internal security service, the FSB (according to, for example, Andreikovets and Mamonova, 2022; Espresso TV, 2024), specifically armed Chechens who identified themselves as FSB officers (according to deputy director Hanna Skrypka, interviewed by Nemtsova, 2023), officials of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation (according to deputy director Hanna Skrypka, interviewed by Nemtsova, 2023) and/or officials of occupation structures, such as workers in occupied museums (according to deputy director Hanna Skrypka, interviewed by Andreikovets and Mamonova, 2022); sometimes, different descriptors have been used by the same sources.

Ukraine on Corruption Prevention (NACP),³ had reportedly identified and distinguished between “109 objects that were stolen by the Russians and another 68 that were likely appropriated by representatives of the Russian Federation [встановити 109 об’єктів, які викрали росіяни, і ще 68, які, ймовірно, були привласнені представниками РФ].”⁴ At the time of writing, the location of the vast majority of the missing artworks had not been confirmed.

It is important to note that, despite widespread press coverage of the incident, few to none of the reported details had been verified using open source research methods, and, to our knowledge, related digital information has not been stably preserved. Because the removal of the Museum’s collection items occurred under occupation, and without the evident consent or participation of the Museum’s lawfully appointed senior staff, it is possible that the activity is a violation of Ukraine’s national cultural heritage protection laws. Investigating this activity for verification and documentation supports the general effort toward legal accountability for Russia’s full-scale war on Ukraine and the specific effort to monitor and recover damaged or stolen cultural heritage materials. These goals are in keeping with the Conflict Observatory’s mission to raise public awareness of war crimes and human rights violations in Ukraine.

Russia’s Appropriation of Ukrainian Cultural Property: Legal and Institutional Context

Since 2014, the Russian Federation has seized control of dozens of museums, libraries, and archives, along with their collections and holdings, in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.⁵ For instance, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted the Federal Law on Special Legal Regulation of Relations in the Culture and Tourism Sectors following the Accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation and the Creation of New Constituent Entities within the Russian Federation – the Republic of Crimea and the Federal City of Sevastopol on February 12, 2015,⁶ and the Federal Law On Legal Regulation of Relations in Culture in Connection with the Incorporation into the Russian Federation of the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Luhansk People’s Republic, the Zaporizhzhia Region and the Kherson Region, and the Formation of the New Constituent Entities Within the Russian Federation – the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Luhansk People’s Republic, the Zaporizhzhia Region and the Kherson

³ The War and Art Database was taken offline due to “the lack of a regulatory framework” for the online portal and a duplication of the efforts of the State Register of Sanctions (CMS 2024).

⁴ According to the War and Art Database of the National Agency of Ukraine on Corruption Prevention (NACP), reviewed by Plys, 2024.

⁵ According to a review of legislation by Cherednychenko and Herasymchuk, 2024, with regard to museums; open-source research by the Luhansk Regional Human Rights Centre “Alternative”, 2023, with regard to libraries; and a survey of liberated institutions with photographic recording of emptied shelves by archive staff, as reported by the director of the State Archive of Kherson Oblast, Iryna Lopushynska, when interviewed by Siarki, 2024, with regard to archives.

⁶ Rossiiskaya Federatsiya, 2015.



Region on March 18, 2023.⁷ These laws directed the incorporation of a range of cultural property types—archaeological sites, historic monuments, archival collections, museum objects, and other portable cultural property—into the relevant Russian state registers. Incorporation into a state register transfers ownership title to the Russian Federation and purports to nullify Ukrainian ownership claims. According to the Chair of the International Council of Museums in Ukraine, Anastasiia Cherednychenko, in total, “collections from 77 Ukrainian museums” can “now” be “found in the state catalog of Russia’s museum fund.”⁸

With regard to Ukrainian cultural property seized by the Russian Federation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, this work has reportedly been completed. The Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies, a Kyiv-based non-governmental organization, has analyzed orders of the Council of Ministers of the occupation administration of the Republic of Crimea in 2014; an order of the Ministry of Culture of Russia in 2021; certificates of registration of museum holdings in the Museum Fund of the Russian Federation on June 24, 2019, December 29, 2020, August 4, 2021, and August 4, 2021 (two registrations in one day); and exhibitions of museum holdings at museum institutions in occupied Crimea. Based on this work, CISS argues that there is an apparent widespread, systematic appropriation of Ukrainian cultural assets by the state institutions of the Russian Federation and the occupying administrations.⁹

We discuss the legal implications of the appropriation of cultural objects from the Kherson Regional Art Museum in further detail below. The general legal framework can be summarized as follows. Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine criminalizes several crimes against cultural property committed during the armed conflict, including their misappropriation. This criminal liability is based on the provisions such as Article 4 of the 1954 Hague Convention and its 1954 First Protocol and reinforced by its 1999 Second Protocol and other legal provisions such as Article 8(2)(a)(iv) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which prohibit the States Parties to the Convention from misappropriating cultural property obtained during armed conflict, both as a result of hostilities and during the possible occupation of the territory of another state. The international community and Ukraine have not recognized the annexation of part of Ukrainian territory by the Russian Federation, and Ukraine has not agreed to change the ownership of cultural property that was there at the time of the occupation. Therefore, the misappropriation of cultural property by the Russian Federation may be considered a crime under Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine and should be properly investigated.

⁷ Rossiiskaya Federatsiya, 2023.

⁸ Cherednychenko and Herasymchuk, 2024.

⁹ Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024.



Investigation Questions

The Kherson Regional Art Museum—named after Oleksiy Shovkunenکو—also known as Oleksii Shovkunenکو Kherson Regional Art Museum, Kherson Fine Art Museum, and Kherson Art Museum, had a unique collection. It ranged “from intricate 17th century Orthodox icons to works by a multitude of Ukrainian, Russian, and other European masters including Ivan Aivazovsky, Vasily Polenov, Auguste von Bayer, and Peter Lely,”¹⁰ Ivan Pokhytonov, Mykhailo Andrienko-Nechytailo, and Gabriel Gluck,¹¹ plus “sculptures and samples of decorative ceramics.”¹²

To assess the reported appropriation of between 10,000 works of art (according to the director of the Central Museum of Taurida in occupied Simferopol, Andrei Malgin)¹³ and 12,000 works of art (according to the minister of culture for the occupying administration of Kherson Oblast, Artem Lagoyskiy)¹⁴—both numbers having been questioned by Kherson Art Museum, which calculated the loss of more than 11,000¹⁵—from a public building dedicated to art and education about and through art, the CURIA Lab investigated:

- Who was involved in the reported removal of cultural assets from the Kherson Regional Art Museum in 2022?
- Who was involved in the reported deposition of the Museum’s cultural assets at Simferopolo’s Taurida Museum?
- Can we confirm that cultural assets were, in fact, moved from the Kherson Museum to the Taurida Museum?

One of the suggestions made by occupation authorities is that the Museum’s collection was at risk of damage due to an anticipated intensification of fighting in the city of Kherson in early November 2022. Occupation authorities have insinuated that the collection items were not adequately protected from bombardment or other structural damage to the museum building. These claims merit investigation because they could be invoked to support Russia’s claims that it was acting in accordance with longstanding international standards such as the 1954 Hague Convention by providing storage conditions that were safer than what the Museum was already providing. This investigation sought information on the situation and events at the Kherson Museum before the occupation to shed light on the potential logic and conduct of activities at the museum during the occupation.

¹⁰ According to museum director Alina Dotsenko and archive worker Hanna Skrypka, paraphrased by Farrell, 2022.

¹¹ According to Kishkovsky, 2022.

¹² According to Support4Partnership, 2024

¹³ Interviewed by Bonet, 2022.

¹⁴ According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024b.

¹⁵ Cf. Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023b; Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024b.



Methods and Limitations

Our investigators began this investigation with a high level of familiarity with public narratives about the removal of collection items from the Kherson Regional Art Museum, we controlled for potential bias by searching for a range of sources that could challenge pre-set assumptions. To verify a digital item and validate related claims, we confirmed its original source, content, and accuracy. Our verification tools included reverse image searching, HTML source code assessment, and geolocation. Beyond materially demonstrable points of fact, triangulation of interpretation and narration of facts also required that we build a consensus on events across multiple sources and types of sources. We searched primary and secondary sources in textual and audiovisual social media and professional media and consciously incorporated competing perspectives. We recorded our search steps in structured spreadsheets. The principles and steps we used in our search, retrieval, analysis, and documentation steps closely follow the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations (HRL & OHCHR, 2022).

We used open source information and commercial satellite imagery, following the guidelines outlined in the Berkeley Protocol. Specifically, we used multiple search engines to introduce algorithmic plurality in the assessment and collection steps (Google, Yandex, and Bing). We assessed online information in Ukrainian, Russian, and English, concentrating on common social media sites used by both Ukrainian and Russian communities: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X, and Telegram. Facebook, Telegram and YouTube have the highest share of users among all social media users in Ukraine, as of this writing. Most key terms were simultaneously utilized in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. CURIA analysts reviewed hits for content to the point of saturation, or the point that they were not finding any meaningful new details about the course of events. We then focused on compiling the image-verified identifications of the artworks, since these can provide information that artworks have been removed and possibly transferred.

There are several limitations to our findings. First, we consulted satellite imagery to investigate the logistics of the operation of moving artworks from the Kherson Museum to Simferopol. Satellite images provide incomplete information due to gaps in coverage and naturally occurring cloud formations, which obscure the satellite view. Maxar, a very high resolution commercial satellite platform, shows two large trucks parked next to the Museum on November 3, 2022. We attempted to trace the exact route these trucks followed from the Kherson Museum to Simferopol but were unsuccessful. We therefore do not have information about the trucks' itinerary and who might have provided support to the convoy en route to Simferopol. Second, for information about events at the Museum before and during the artworks' removal, we rely exclusively on publicly accessible testimony and principally on the accounts of Museum staff, which they published through institutional accounts in social media or provided to journalistic

outlets. In the absence of machine information such as CCTV footage and satellite imagery, staff accounts provide some of the only sources of information about what occurred. There are more accounts from Kherson Museum staff than from the persons or groups alleged to have participated in the removal. Further, of the staff, there are more accounts from staff members who are in the free territories than from those who have remained in the occupied territory to maintain their work or have been appointed to the institution by occupation administrators.

This situation results in two limitations: the narrative of events is skewed toward the narratives of displaced Museum staff, and we have relied on after-the-fact accounts shared in social media and professional media. We handled these limitations by searching for related information from other sources. These affirm some assertions about the alleged timing and mechanics of the removal. They do not confirm or deny the motives or details of specific individuals reported to have collaborated. With respect to after-the-fact accounts in Facebook posts, we began by verifying the reliability of the account and confirmed that it is, in fact, a Facebook account owned and managed by the Kherson Regional Art Museum. We also assessed the consistency of content, comparing Museum Facebook posts with information provided in news interviews. The consistency level was high. Finally, this is a disinformation-rich environment. Russian and Ukrainian authorities have conflicting accounts of what happened, as they do many aspects of the war. We sought to identify disinformation by verifying or falsifying our collected data and searching for discrepant or falsifiable claims or images. While it is not possible to state that we have perfect knowledge of disinformation, we did apply methods to mitigate the effects of deliberately false claims, such as identifying the material basis and internal coherence of claims, assessing the trustworthiness of sources, and checking whether there was consensus over claims across sources on both sides.

As our findings demonstrate, Russian authorities and occupation structures as well as Ukrainian authorities assert that cultural assets from Kherson have been transferred to Simferopol. Ukrainian efforts at verification of the locations of missing artworks are based on Russian publications of images of transferred artworks. Their disagreements concern the logic and conduct of this activity.

Findings

Appropriation of Assets from the Kherson Regional Art Museum

Timeline of Activities, as Reported in Traditional and Social Media

Many of the details of the narrative of events have been derived from numerous, significantly consistent, mutually supportive professional reports and media interviews by museum director Alina Dotsenko and deputy director Hanna Skrypka. The inconsistencies, such as discrepancies in published numbers of reportedly appropriated and/or deposited assets, appear to be products



of sheer uncertainty, exacerbated by idiosyncratic rounding up or down by publication platforms. They have been reinforced by various other pieces of open source information. These encompass: official reports from Ukrainian sources with visual records of the renovation of the museum before the occupation; eyewitness accounts from Ukrainian sources with visual records of events in progress during the reported appropriation and deposition; journalistic investigations on site with visual records of the Museum after the reported appropriation; and official acts of the Russian Federation and occupying administrations, which have been publicized in reports by media in Russia and the occupied territories of Ukraine, which have published visual records of the Central Museum of Taurida after the reported deposition. Confidence in these findings could only be higher if circumstances had permitted the recording and publication by CURIA analysts of information from the reported sites of appropriation and deposition.

Activities Preceding the Full-Scale Invasion

On November 12, 2021, Museum staff photographically documented the removal of exhibits from their displays, apparently to prepare for physical restoration work in the museum building.¹⁶ On November 19, 2021, Museum staff photographically documented the process of moving what it claimed were nearly nine hundred artworks “in frames, under glass,” into professional storage facilities within the building, as additional preparatory measures for the restoration of the building.¹⁷ CURIA analysts identified evidence that physical renovations were, in fact, underway at the Museum in the weeks and months leading up to the full-scale invasion. In the Ukraine national museum system, renovations must be applied for with significant advance notice. To prepare for the renovations, Museum employees removed collection items from display vitrines and wall displays to storage facilities in the Museum’s basement and conservation facilities. National museum regulations require that collection items be individually packaged using materials appropriate to their specific physical features. Analysts were not always able to verify that these steps had been followed, but they did find some photographic records and participant testimony of the achievement of best practices despite the circumstances.¹⁸ Also, film footage shot before the invasion shows the Museum display spaces empty and sealed off with humidity- and temperature-control equipment, suggesting professional best practices in conservation conditions. In addition, as part of the renovations work, fencing was erected around the museum to create a perimeter for construction equipment and personnel, scaffolding, and building materials. Analysts identified images that documented the presence of this fencing from the autumn of 2021 until the autumn of 2022.¹⁹

¹⁶ According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2021a.

¹⁷ According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2021b.

¹⁸ E.g. Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2021b.

¹⁹ E.g. Novyny Donbasu, 2022; Sobolevskiy, 2022.



Activities During the Full-Scale Invasion and Occupation, Prior to the Alleged Appropriation

On February 24, 2022, Museum director Alina Dotsenko and two other museum workers boarded up or bricked up all of the windows in the building, to minimize the risk of damage from environmental conditions, attacks on the locality, or combat in the vicinity.²⁰ CURIA analysts were unable to verify the presence of these materials on satellite imagery, but we identified photographs that documented the boarding up of windows by 2023 and the destruction of boarding by shelling in 2023.²¹

Although it relays the experiences of other museum workers—in both the free territories and the occupied territories—and eyewitnesses as well, this is primarily Dotsenko’s narrative of what occurred. According to Dotsenko, on March 3, “sixteen Russian soldiers” broke the perimeter fence, arrested a security guard, and forced him, “at gunpoint,” to let them into the Museum.²² According to the eyewitnesses, the Russian soldiers took note of the renovations and left without intruding further.²³ We were unable to verify this report.

On May 4, museum director Alina Dotsenko reported that she was threatened by an unidentified representative of the new administration, prompting her to flee Kherson for the free territories.²⁴

On July 19, according to the Museum’s Facebook account, three “armed and masked employees of the FSB of Russia,” visited the Museum and demanded that deputy director Hanna Skrypka hand over the keys to every room in the building.²⁵ On or about the same time, the occupying administration installed Natalya Leonidovna Desyatova (also written as Natalija Desjatova) as the occupying director of Kherson Art Museum.²⁶ At an unspecified later date, Skrypka reports, she was “locked up in the museum for two days and ordered to compile a catalog of all of the works of art” (according to Skrypka in an interview).²⁷

Activities During the Appropriation

According to Desyatova, the Russian leadership did not warn her about the “evacuation.”²⁸ The exhibits, she reported, were moved on the orders of the governor of the occupying

²⁰ According to museum director Alina Dotsenko, cited by Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023c.

²¹ E.g. Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023d; Kherson Daily, 2023.

²² According to a local eyewitness, cited by museum director Alina Dotsenko, cited by Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023c.

²³ According to a local eyewitness, cited by museum director Alina Dotsenko, cited by Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023c.

²⁴ According to museum director Alina Dotsenko, cited by Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023c.

²⁵ According to museum director Alina Dotsenko, cited by Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023c.

²⁶ According to museum director Alina Dotsenko, cited by Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023c.

²⁷ Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024a; see also Skrypka’s testimony in Bell and Semple, 2023.

²⁸ Paraphrased by Shvets, 2024.



administration of Kherson Oblast, Vladimir Saldo.²⁹ Desyatova claims that she did not receive a formal order from the Ministry of Culture or the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and did not receive packing materials for the items. Organizational and logistical support was reportedly provided by the director of the Taurida Museum, Andriy Malgin, and the Head of the Department of Museums, Libraries and Cultural Education under the Ministry of Culture of the occupying administration of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Sergei Patrushev.³⁰

On October 31, “blue Kamaz vehicles with the emblem of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Russian Federation”³¹ were reported to have lined up outside the museum, accompanied by a mix of around forty or fifty, up to seventy, Russian soldiers, representatives of the Russian Ministry of Culture, and Federal Security Service (FSB) officers in civilian clothes.³² Thereafter, Desyatova, Malgin, and Patrushev reportedly worked “day and night” to transfer the assets.³³

On November 1, “three trucks and a school bus [or two school buses] loaded with loot left the territory of the museum in just one day.”³⁴ The trucks’ number plates were said to be missing.³⁵ As documented elsewhere,³⁶ in videos that were recorded and published by Kherson resident KHERSON: Non Fake,³⁷ photos that were taken by an anonymous source then published by professional journalists,³⁸ photos that were published by a charity historical festival³⁹ and shared by Kherson Art Museum,⁴⁰ and satellite imagery that was identified and analyzed by the Conflict Observatory,⁴¹ altogether, images from November 1—possibly until November 4—show blue and white, non-state-designated trucks outside the museum, a yellow school bus outside the museum, and a white van on the premises; on at least one occasion, images appear to show men loading artworks into a suspect truck. According to local resident Lydia, “they [were] load[ed] into their huge cars [«Urals»] [Грузят в свои громадные машины [«Уралы»]],” “without any protection, without packages, just like some kind of garbage [Без какой-либо

²⁹ Interviewed by Shvets, 2024.

³⁰ Interviewed by Shvets, 2024.

³¹ According to museum director Alina Dotsenko, cited by Support4Partnership, 2024.

³² According to museum director Alina Dotsenko and deputy director Hanna Skrypka, paraphrased by Farrell, 2022; see also Skrypka, paraphrased by Andreikovets and Mamonova, 2022; see also statements by Dotsenko, cited by Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023c and Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024a.

³³ According to Desyatova, paraphrased by Shvets, 2024.

³⁴ According to museum workers, paraphrased by the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security, Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, 2022.

³⁵ Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024a.

³⁶ E.g. Hrudka, 2022.

³⁷ KHERSON: Non Fake, 2022

³⁸ Ryba, 2022.

³⁹ LEGIO Historica, 2022.

⁴⁰ According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2022.

⁴¹ Conflict Observatory, 2022; Welsh et al, 2022.



защиты, без упаковок, просто как мусор какой-то,» by “Russian marauders [русские мародеры].”⁴²

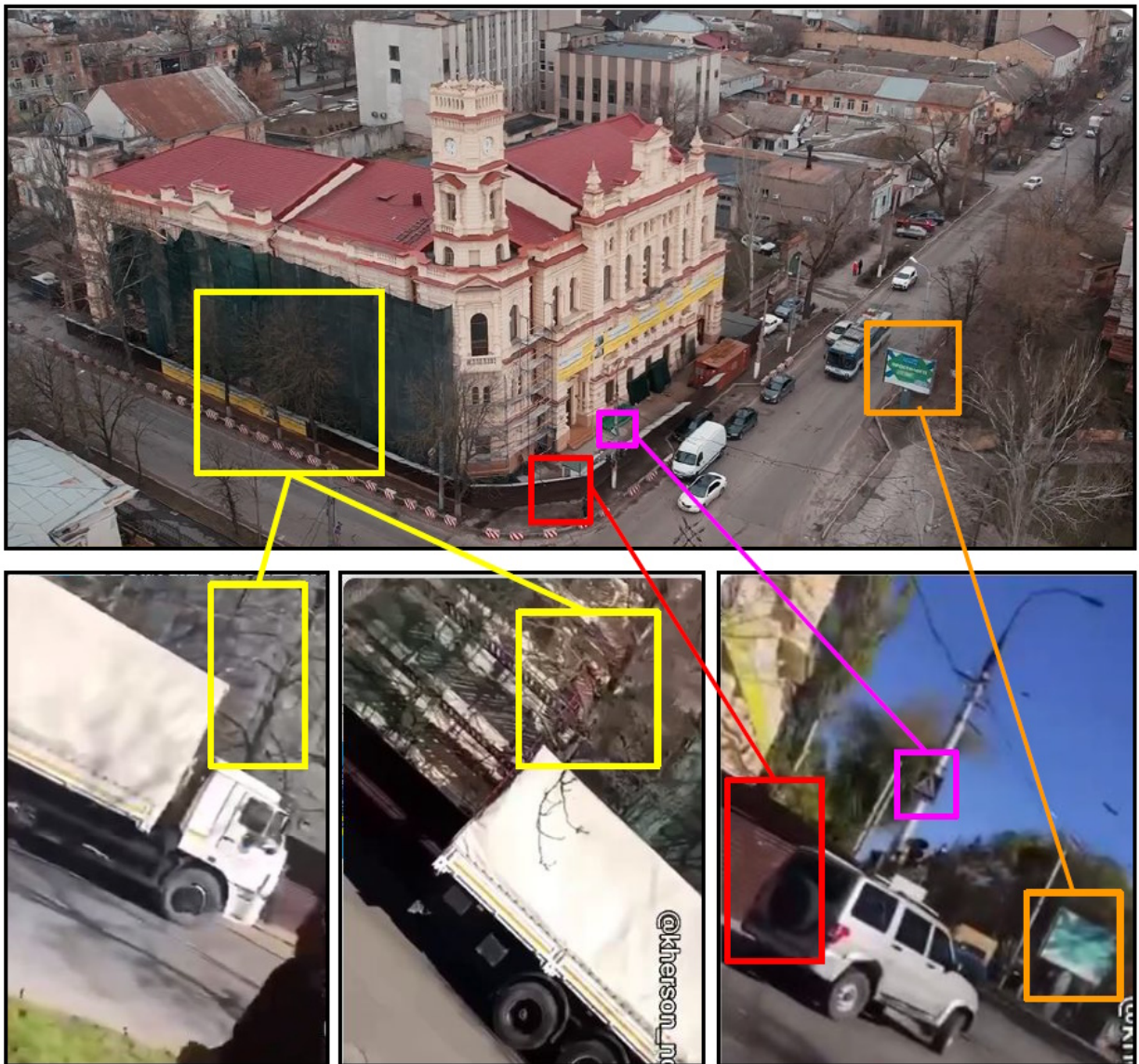


Figure 1: The top image shows the Kherson Regional Art Museum. The bottom left and center images, which were published by Telegram channel Kherson: Non Fake on November 1, 2022, show one of the suspect trucks in the vicinity of the museum. The bottom right image reaffirms the location of the footage. The colored boxes identify corresponding details of the location in the various images. See also visual verification in previous reporting by Conflict Observatory, 2022; Welsh et al, 2022.

⁴² Interviewed by Vasilyeva, 2022.



On November 2, according to Museum workers, two more trucks departed from the Museum.⁴³ Between November 3 and November 9,⁴⁴ the “leftovers were picked up by a bus.”⁴⁵ Individuals described as wearing “military uniform,” including a service member of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation with the call sign Shaman, took the last load, which was reported to contain “19th-century works needing restoration.”⁴⁶ Desyatova reported that this person’s face was covered and that she “c[ould]n’t even see his eyes, it could [have] be[en] anyone.” CURIA was unable to prove or reject the claim that “Shaman” participated. By November 4, as documented elsewhere, in photos that were taken by an anonymous source and published by citizen journalists⁴⁷ then republished by professional journalists,⁴⁸ a similar blue truck, from which men appeared to be unloading artworks, was located outside the Central Museum of Taurida.

⁴³ According to museum workers, paraphrased by the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security, Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, 2022.

⁴⁴ According to deputy director Hanna Skrypka, paraphrased by Farrell, 2022.

⁴⁵ According to museum workers, paraphrased by the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security, Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, 2022; also according to local resident Lydia, interviewed by Novaya Gazeta Europe, translated and quoted by Kishkovsky, 2022.

⁴⁶ According to Desyatova, paraphrased by Shvets, 2024.

⁴⁷ E.g. Khudyakova, 2022.

⁴⁸ E.g. Farrell, 2022.

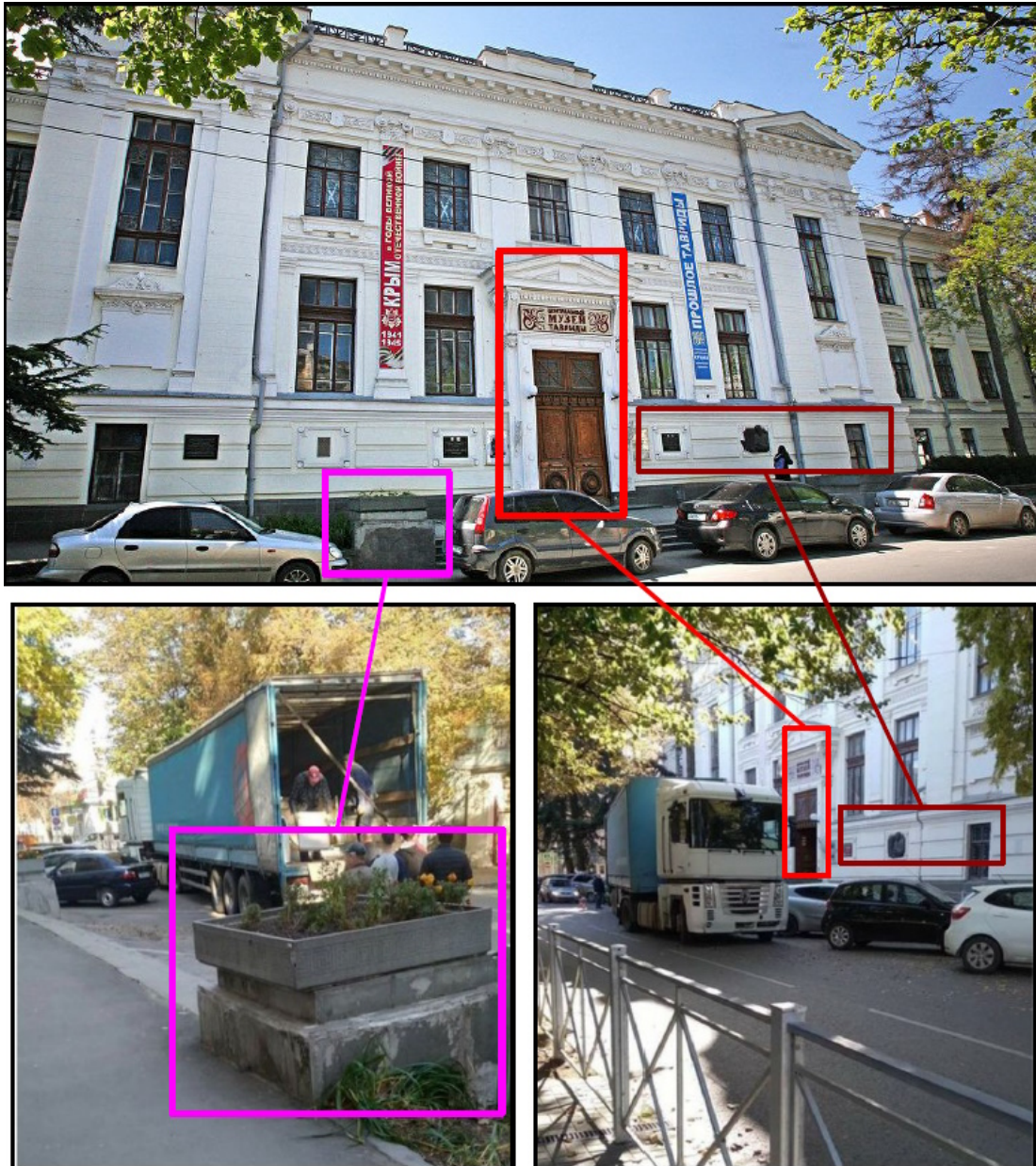


Figure 2: The top image shows the front entrance to the Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol. The bottom left and right images, which were published by Tetyana Khudyakova at Tverezo.Info on November 4, 2022, appear to show the unloading of artworks from one of the suspect trucks outside the museum. The colored boxes identify corresponding details of the location in the various images. See also visual verification in previous reporting by Conflict Observatory, 2022; Welsh et al, 2022.

On November 12, “when the Ukrainians were already in the city,”⁴⁹ occupying director Desyatova left Kherson.

⁴⁹ According to Desyatova, interviewed by Shvets, 2024.



Activities After the Liberation of Kherson and the Completion of the Alleged Museum Appropriation

On February 21, 2023, Global News published a video report from the emptied basement of the museum.⁵⁰ On June 23, 2023, occupying director Desyatova was sanctioned by the Council of the European Union because the cultural assets of the museum had been “removed from the museum in October and November 2022 and taken illegally to Simferopol, in illegally annexed Crimea,” “under Desyatova’s control and with the assistance of Russian security forces.” She was, the decision stated, “responsible for supporting and implementing actions and policies which undermine[d] and threaten[ed] the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.”⁵¹ For her reported role in the appropriation of works from the Museum, Desyatova is sanctioned by thirteen mechanisms in eight governmental jurisdictions, according to information available in Open Sanctions (<https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-QjpUBjc7eUvyTaHwYVq7NT/>).

Deposition of Assets

Multiple sources report that the collection items taken from the Kherson Regional Art Museum were sent to the occupied Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol.⁵² At the Taurida museum on April 1, 2023, occupying authorities signed a “storage agreement” between the Central Museum of Taurida and the Kherson Region Department the Ministry of Culture for objects removed from Kherson museum.⁵³ According to the announcement by the then-occupying administration of the Ministry of Culture of the Kherson region, “the Ministry of Culture of the Kherson region and the director of the Simferopol Central Museum of Taurida, Andrey Vitalievich Malygin [sic], signed an agreement on the storage of previously evacuated paintings of the Kherson Regional Art Museum [sic]. The exhibits are under supervision, with all technical requirements for storage.”⁵⁴

On April 2, the head of the occupying administration of the Ministry of Culture in Kherson Oblast, Oleksandr Kuzmenko, announced that “the most valuable exhibits [найцінніші експонати]” from “the collections of local history and art museums of Kherson” had “temporarily [тимчасово]” been transferred to Crimea, while other “part[s] [частина]” had been transferred to Henichesk.⁵⁵

The reported appropriation of assets from Kherson Art Museum and the reported deposition of those assets at the Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol have been addressed by the

⁵⁰ Bell and Semple, 2023.

⁵¹ Council of the European Union, 2023.

⁵² According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023a.

⁵³ According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2023a; see also the statement of the First Deputy Chairman of the Kherson Regional Council Yuri Sobolevsky, cited by Charter’97, 2023.

⁵⁴ Ministerstvo Kulturi Khersonskoyi Oblasti, 2023.

⁵⁵ Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024a; see also TASS, 2023.



occupation director of the Central Museum of Taurida, Andrei Vitalyevich Malgin. According to Malgin, “due to the introduction of martial law on the territory of the Kherson region, [he was] instructed to take the exhibits of the Kherson Art Museum for temporary storage and ensure their safety until they [were] returned to their rightful owner,”⁵⁶ in other words, “for safekeeping.”⁵⁷ Again according to Malgin, the “evacuated [эвакуироват]” assets “will [be] store[d] and give[n] back [будем хранить и передадим]” to “their rightful owners... the community and the legitimate authorities of the Kherson oblast [законных владельцев... сообщество и законные власти Херсонской области].”⁵⁸

On June 23, 2023, Malgin was sanctioned by the Council of the European Union, for “supporting and implementing actions and policies which undermine[d] and threaten[ed] the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.”⁵⁹ For his reported role in accessioning items removed from the Kherson Regional Art Museum, Malgin is sanctioned by thirteen mechanisms in six governmental jurisdictions, according to information available in Open Sanctions (<https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/Q77000611/>).

On May 31, 2024, the occupation administration of Crimean cultural institutions, which has responsibility for historical artifacts and cultural objects on the peninsula, ordered its subordinate institutions to prepare museum items for “evacuation.” The order was issued in a letter from the occupation Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Crimea to the heads of museum institutions on the peninsula.⁶⁰ Previous reports of such orders have been denied by Russian sources.⁶¹ No similar such denials of this reported order could immediately be identified by CURIA analysts.

According to the Kherson Regional Art Museum, as of October 29, 2024, at least 128 out of more than 11,000 appropriated assets had been identified by its experts, from visual documentation of their possession by the occupying administration, on the basis of images of the artworks themselves; details on the backs of the artworks such as signatures, dates and codes; and/or records of museum catalogue inventory numbers.⁶² CURIA analysts were able to reverify at least 101 of the individually reported verifications by comparing the corresponding photographs that were published by Kherson Art Museum to demonstrate their assertions, as well as to independently verify at least 25 of the identifications with additional information that

⁵⁶ Interviewed by Beardsworth, 2022.

⁵⁷ According to Malgin, interviewed by Economist, 2024.

⁵⁸ Interviewed by RIA Novosti Krim, 2023.

⁵⁹ Council of the European Union, 2023.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Crimea, order 02-21/2005-03, 31.05.2024. Issued by Andrei Rostenko, Deputy Minister, Head of the Department of State Protection of Cultural Heritage. Cf. republication by National Resistance Center, 2024.

⁶¹ E.g. RIA Kabardino-Balkariya, 2022.

⁶² According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024c.

was published before the reported appropriation of the museum's assets or before the occupation of the city.

Most recently, as of November 26, 2024, through a partnership between the occupying administration of the Ministry of Culture of Kherson Oblast and the Russian oil pipeline construction and management company Transneft, some cultural assets that had been appropriated from other cultural institutions in occupied Kherson—identifiably, the Novokakhovsk Art Gallery named after Albin Gavdzinsky⁶³—have been displayed in an exhibition, “Always Nova Kakhovka,” at the institutional museum of Transneft joint stock company,⁶⁴ which has been sanctioned by the United States,⁶⁵ the United Kingdom,⁶⁶ and the European Union.⁶⁷ This highlights the risk of the international transfer of the cultural assets of Kherson Art Museum from Ukraine to Russia and beyond.

Analysis: Possible Legal Violations

Regarding the questions under investigation, this study has compiled information that relates to reported events at Kherson Regional Art Museum. With high confidence, CURIA analysts believe that the balance of information affirms that truckloads of cultural assets were taken from the Kherson Regional Art Museum by Russian authorities. Further, the balance of information affirms that at least 128 of those cultural assets were moved to Crimea: at least 127 were or are in the Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol, taken and held by agents of the Russian Federation with responsibility for culture and security. Our confidence in these conclusions could only be increased to complete confidence by physical inspection of the appropriated assets at the reported deposition institutions.

There are several legal instruments that speak to the appropriation of cultural property in war and/or by occupying authorities. Under Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, violations of the rules of war, which encompass misappropriation of cultural property, are prohibited. Under Article 4 of the 1954 Hague Convention, to which both Russia and Ukraine are parties, misappropriation, which would encompass expropriation, of cultural property is prohibited. Under Article 12 of the 1954 Hague Convention, emergency transport of cultural property should be conducted under special protection after an approved request for immunity, wherein the request was not reported to have been sought. Meanwhile, under Article 13, transport in urgent cases that cannot be conducted under pre-approved special protection should be conducted under pre-notified urgent protection by display of a triangle of Blue Shields, wherein the

⁶³ According to Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi, 2024d.

⁶⁴ According to Ministerstvo Kulturi Khersonskoi Oblasti, 2024.

⁶⁵ According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022.

⁶⁶ Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, Her Majesty's Treasury, 2022.

⁶⁷ According to Ericsson, Ovidi, Cursano and Konig, 2022.



notification was not reported to have been delivered and the emblem was not visible on any of the suspect trucks; and, under Article 19, transport in urgent cases should be post-approved by the usual custodians as necessary in the circumstances, wherein the approval was not reported to have been sought. According to Article 15 of the 1954 Hague Convention, personnel who are engaged in the protection of cultural property should be respected and allowed to carry out their duties, while, in their own publications and others' interviews, museum workers reported experiences of disrespect and interference.

As an institution dedicated to education, the arts and sciences, the Kherson Regional Art Museum is protected under Article 56 of the Regulations Annexed to the Fourth Hague Convention of 1907. Likewise, as works of art and science, the Museum's collection is protected. Any "seizure of, destruction [of] or willful damage done to" the Museum and its works is forbidden, according to the 1907 Convention, and can be made the subject of legal proceedings.⁶⁸

Under Article 8(2)(a)(iv) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, as well as under Article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, extensive, unlawful, wanton, militarily unnecessary appropriation of property constitutes a war crime.

Under Article 8(2)(b)(xiii) of the Rome Statute, the militarily unnecessary seizure of the protected property of a hostile party, by a perpetrator who is aware of the existence of an international armed conflict and the protected status of the property, constitutes a war crime.

Under Article 8(2)(b)(ix) of the Rome Statute, militarily unnecessary attacks against buildings that are dedicated to education, art, science and/or charitable purposes constitute war crimes.

While the Russian Federation is not a State Party to the 1999 Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, it could voluntarily follow Article 9, with a view specifically to prohibiting and preventing the illegal transfer of ownership of cultural property in occupied territory, including "illicit export, other removal or transfer of ownership of cultural property." However, to the contrary, the Russian Federation appears to engage in various forms of appropriation of Ukrainian cultural property. These include the physical seizure of cultural property and the adoption of regulations that legally incorporate Ukrainian cultural property into Russian property registers.

Based on the information that has been compiled in this report, the Russian Federation may have violated Articles 4, 12, 13, and 15 of the 1954 Hague Convention, Article 8(2)(b)(xiii) of the Rome Statute and, thereby, Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine.

⁶⁸ International Peace Conference, 1907.



The Kherson Regional Art Museum was a significant public good for the residents of the city of Kherson, and of the broader region. The Museum was a hub of cultural activity, providing space for musical performances, art exhibitions, literary events, and educational programs for students and community members. The mass appropriation of artworks greatly depleted the museum's cultural resources, as did the dismissal of experienced museum professionals from its staff. Two years after the events discussed here, the museum remains closed to the public. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had devastating impacts on civilian life across the country. The Russian Federation's system of legal control over forcibly appropriated Ukrainian cultural assets warrants additional, sustained investigation as part of a broader legal accountability and post-war restitution effort.







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Khersonskiy Khudozhniy Muzeyi (Херсонський Художній Музей). (2024d, December 20). 🤔 Приблизно місяць тому в Росії відбулась подія, яка шокує своєю цинічністю — в Москві вперше виставили на показ вкрадені на Херсонщині картини [🤔 About a month ago, an event that shocks with its cynicism took place in Russia - in Moscow, for the first time, the paintings stolen in Kherson region were put on display]. *Facebook*.

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Ministerstvo Kulturi Khersonskoyi Oblasti (Министерство культуры Херсонской области). (2023, April 2). 1 апреля 2023 г. Министерством культуры Херсонской области и директором Симферопольского Центрального музея Тавриды Малыгиным Андреем Витальевичем был подписан договор о хранении ранее эвакуированных картин Херсонского областного художественного музея. Экспонаты находятся под присмотром, со всеми техническими требованиями к хранению. В ходе теплого приема также поступило предложение об обучении музейных специалистов Херсонской области на базе Центрального музея Тавриды. Мы очень рады такому сотрудничеству, ведь перенимать опыт у своих коллег – это необходимый шаг к саморазвитию и расширению профессиональных познаний. [On April 1, 2023, the Ministry of Culture of the Kherson region and the director of the Simferopol Central Museum of Taurida, Andrey Vitalievich Malygin, signed an agreement on the storage of previously evacuated paintings of the Kherson Regional Art Museum. The exhibits are under supervision, with all technical requirements for storage. During the warm reception, a proposal was also made to train museum specialists of the Kherson region at the Central Museum of Taurida. We are very pleased with this cooperation, because learning from your colleagues is a necessary step towards self-development and expanding your professional knowledge.] <https://t.me/kultkherson/825>

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