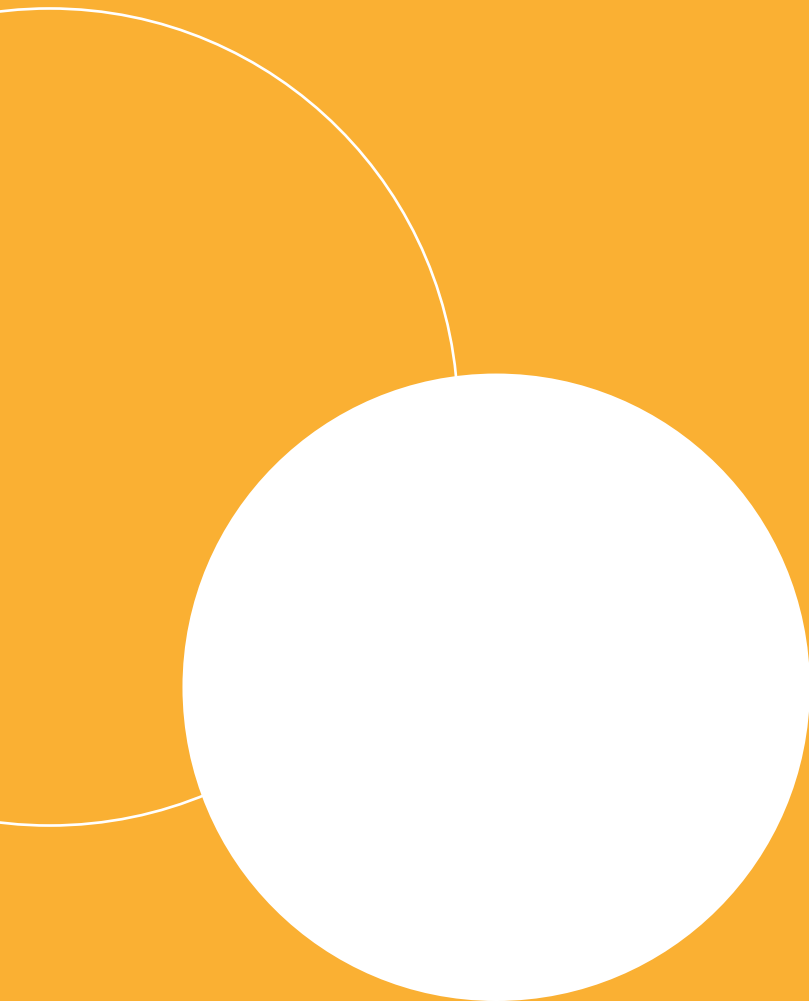


Social resilience in times of crisis

Perspectives from Ukraine and Moldova

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OUR AIMS

- Strengthening community resilience in Ukraine and Moldova
- Engaging the cultural and creative sector to build community resilience
- Fostering transnational learning and collaboration
- Enhancing Baltic Sea Region authorities' understanding of community resilience

WHAT WE DO

- Linking Ukrainian and Moldovan cities to the BSR Cultural Pearls network for capacity building and shadowing BSR Cultural Pearls cities
- Setting up community resilience learning labs
- Testing cultural tools in Ukrainian and Moldovan pilot cities

Who is RESCOM?

LEAD PARTNER

Council of Baltic Sea States Secretariat

MOLDOVA

County House of Culture - Anenii Noi

SWEDEN

Härnösand Municipality

UKRAINE

Izolyatsia Foundation

UKRAINE

Rivne Oblast (State Administration)





INTRODUCTION

The Resilient Communities Learning Platform (RESCOM), co-funded by the Swedish Institute and led by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), is a transnational initiative designed to strengthen community resilience in Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).

Since its launch in September 2024, RESCOM has expanded the focus of the BSR Cultural Pearls project, applying its culture-driven approach to social resilience in mid-sized cities across Ukraine and Moldova. The project provides local authorities and stakeholders with tools and best practices to foster cross-sectoral collaboration, empower cultural and creative sectors, and enhance communities' capacity to respond to external shocks, such as conflict or economic instability.

Through peer learning, capacity-building workshops, and pilot programs, RESCOM facilitates the exchange of knowledge and participatory methods. These efforts ensure

that local leaders are equipped to build inclusive, democratically active communities.


This publication shares the key conclusions and insights generated during RESCOM's Learning Labs, offering practical recommendations and actionable strategies for local authorities, policymakers, and cultural practitioners. By disseminating these findings, we aim to inspire further innovation in community resilience and promote the adoption of participatory, culture-driven approaches in urban planning and social cohesion efforts.





Many smaller cities and towns are struggling with demographic change. In the face of global and regional stressors such as war, migration, economic downturn or the risk of climate disaster decisionmakers call for building “resilience”. Rarely, however, do such efforts focus on the very core of any society – community.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has also shown the urgency of fostering strong, capable communities, able to fend for themselves. As a consequence, Ukrainian city administrations, representatives of civil society as well as their communities have gained valuable experiences about community resilience in practice.

Rivne, Ukraine 

CULTURE AND RESILIENCE UNDER CRISIS

As of November 25 2025, Russian aggression has **destroyed or damaged 1,630 cultural heritage sites in Ukraine**. A total of 36 cultural heritage sites have been completely destroyed. At the same time, as a result of shelling and hostilities, **2,437 cultural infrastructure facilities have been affected, 498 of which have been completely destroyed.**¹

These were not merely buildings; they were repositories of memories and a sense of belonging for entire communities.

In times of crisis, culture continues to serve a vital role in binding together communities displaced by war. For example, the stone embroidery techniques of Nova Kakhovka are now being taught across Europe, offering workshop participants not only the skills to preserve the city’s unique ornamentation but also strengthening social connections among those forced to leave their homes. Traditional crafts, food, and symbols are being recorded, taught, shared, and used to reinforce community ties among those living far from home. These activities provide a lifeline for preserving identity and fostering resilience in the face of displacement and loss.

However, **strong partnerships, international collaboration, and sustained funding** are essential to

keep these initiatives alive. Ukraine’s cultural industries are under immense pressure: artists face threats to their lives, cultural centers are forced to evacuate as their buildings are seized, and society bears an overwhelming emotional burden. Without continued support, the preservation of cultural heritage—and the resilience it fosters—risks being lost.

A PLATFORM FOR PEER LEARNING

From its inception, the RESCOM platform has served as a two-way hub for peer learning, recognizing that community resilience—the ability to adapt, self-organize, and maintain essential societal functions—is a critical yet often underestimated factor in withstanding aggression. The lived experiences of resilience in Ukrainian cities provide, at the same time, invaluable insights to partners in the BSR.

Simultaneously, the BSR Cultural Pearls initiative has offered a stable and structured platform for exchange for partners in Moldova and Ukraine. The Learning Labs hosted by RESCOM have become spaces for networking, sharing experiences, and mutual learning. By facilitating the cross-border exchange of best practices RESCOM has fostered a robust network and lasting partnerships. Within this network, the creativity and experience needed to nurture community resilience are resources to be shared. ■

Learning Lab I

FROM CASE TO METHOD

Participants in the **RESCOM Learning Lab I** in Helsingborg explored tools and methodologies for engaging communities through creative and cultural events and activities.

The participants used the lab to create strategies for engaging non-users—individuals who are not typically involved in community activities—fostering participation and determining the needs of their target groups.

Departing from cases of community events initiated in the BSR Cultural Pearls cities, each case was surveyed for best methods and learning opportunities.

NON-USERS AND COMMON THIRDS

The discussions highlighted the importance of research and targeted outreach to identify and understand the barriers faced by non-users. **Surveys, interviews and social media outreach** were used in various cases to reach new target groups.

A key strategy discussed was the use of **common thirds** when organising community events. The common third here refers to something that people can define themselves to—something that everybody already knows. A celebrity invited to a local concert, traditional cooking, a popular activity such as going to the sauna, or a game that everybody knows how to play—these common thirds provide relatable entry points for engagement.

Local traditions, festivals, and well-known activities were used to foster a sense of belonging and ownership. For instance, cultural events, storytelling sessions, and creative workshops were designed to engage non-users by **integrating their interests and cultural backgrounds**. This approach

ensured that even marginalized or hesitant individuals felt included and motivated to participate.

LOCAL VOICES, LOCAL IDENTITIES

Methods such as **collecting local stories, creating songs, podcasts, or films** were used in several cases to give communities a voice and strengthen local identity. Collaborations between creative professionals and local communities create feedback loops that support the strengthening of local



bonds and identities. The output product is sustainable as material for outreach, education and project visibility.

Projects succeeded especially when they were **community-led and participatory**, with active participation from locals, experts, and authorities. Traditional crafts, food, and music were often used as tools to reconnect communities with their heritage. **Art-based methods** were used not only to create an output (e.g., songs, films) but also as a research method to explore community needs and imagine new initiatives.

SUSTAINING IDENTITY THROUGH CRISIS

In the case of Anenii Noi (Moldova) and Ostvytsia, Rivne (Ukraine), **a central challenge has been the risk of losing identity and maintaining a sense of belonging.**

Here, local identities have been revitalised through cultural reenactment activities.

The planning process have in these cases been a long-term endeavour, involving discussions with the local community, data gathering, meetings with stakeholders and local activists. Suitable locations had to be scouted, such as a physical park in one case and a festival in the other.

Human resources are central due to the leader-driven nature of the method, as well as financial resources, experts, activists and cooperation with local authorities.

The method is represented as a cycle where various components interact: community discussions and data; the facility or location and local resident support; and common resources based on community assets, such as music, culture, food and crafts. ■

Useful tools

- Stakeholder mapping
- Interviews, surveys, focus groups
- Joint workshops and consultations
- Competitions, story collection and storytelling
- Collaborative platforms
- Cultural products
- Cyclical events
- Professional listeners and researchers
- Evaluation and feedback

TEN TRANSFERABLE APPROACHES

1. Research to identify non-users, attraction strategies to convert them to users

2. Local pride can be fostered through cultural narratives

3. Cultural events, like festivals, are tools for community activation which can also engage stakeholders and professionals

4. Stakeholder co-creation and residents' involvement fosters responsibility

5. Collaborative platforms involving various municipal departments fosters integration and pools resources

6. Reciprocal story-telling creates a sense of belonging among citizens

7. Using iterative methods to determine appropriate methods, i.e. research, workshops and/or imagination initiatives

8. Revitalisation of lost identity through reenactment activities

9. Reintegration through participatory approaches, with the interest of the participants in the centre

10. Dare to ask - "Do we need this? Does anybody need this?"

Further reading: *From practice to method. Cultural practices as a toolkit for community resilience - BSR Cultural Pearls & RESCOM case studies*²

 Anenii Noi, Moldova

HERITAGE IN ACTION - COMMUNITY THROUGH CULTURE

In Anenii Noi, Moldova, traditional crafts and festivals are used to strengthen participation and pride in rural communities, connecting generations through shared cultural practice.



5 EXAMPLES FROM UKRAINE

#1

THE INTANGIBLE HERITAGE OF NOVA KAKHOVKA'S STONE EMBROIDERIES

The Ukrainian baroque and traditional art of the post-war city of Nova Kakhovka were threatened by attempts to build 6-story houses. In 2011, the NGO Nova Kakhovka Society of Cultural Heritage Protection was founded to protect, renew and popularise the heritage of the city. Local volunteers recovered the traditional panels of 9 buildings.

Nova Kakhovka is today under total occupation. The breach of the Kakhovka dam and shelling of the city has resulted in the destruction of 50 historical buildings. Working with refugees from Nova Kakhovka, the intangible heritage of the city is preserved through over 70 workshops in both Ukraine and the EU, where participants of any age are taught restoration techniques for the unique stone ornaments.

#2

ARTIST RESIDENCIES IN BAKOTA HUB

For the price of 1 hryvnia, an abandoned school was rented from the municipality in Bakota. In a village of just 6000 inhabitants close the border of Moldova, the Bakota Hub has become a shelter for both artists and displaced people. Locals have been activated through volunteering activities, such as co-creating murals with residency artists, creating public spaces, or repairing a house after a missile attack.

A local veterans rehabilitation camp also builds community solidarity. A common brand and platform support sales of local Bakota crafts. After 4 years, the area has seen economic growth, new jobs, families moving in and an increasingly active community.



OKHTYRKA'S LIBRARIES FOR LIFE

#3

The library in Okhtyrka has become a restored hub in the mass-bombed city, and helps facilitate psycho-emotional recovery.

Inspired by First Lady Olena Zelenskys mental health programme *How Are You?* the hub is a cultural creative space that aims to relieve stress and PTSD.

The hub offers courses and activities such as the youth-oriented *Vision of the Future*, master classes for children such as *Workshop for Creative Ideas*, the book club *Book High*, a chess club, yoga classes and free legal advice. As of now, the library has offered over 500 events for more than 5000 participants.

IZOLYATSIA - FROM DONETSK TO KYIV

#4

Founded in 2010 on the site of a former insulation factory in Donetsk, IZOLYATSIA has lost its physical

space three times due to Russian invasion, yet continues to operate from Kyiv—providing support and capacity development for the Ukrainian cultural sector, with a focus on cultural decentralization and community participation.

The ZMINA project supports the rebuilding of communities, developing their capacities and forging meaningful connections with international partners. The *Room for Heritage* project supports cultural organisations in using heritage to strengthen social cohesion and local identity—for communities in both occupied and non-occupied regions. The organisations engage in deep research into the tangible and intangible heritage of local and displaced communities, building new pathways to bring people together, sustain their cooperation, and ensure that cultural memory becomes a foundation for resilience and renewal.

#5 HERITAGE FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION IN RIVNE

The *Power of Balance* project was implemented by the NGO *Historical Reconstruction Club 'Ostvytsia*, supported by the Ukrainian Culture Foundation. The project targeted veterans, disabled and individuals in rehabilitation through accessible events and sports in the Ostvytsia Historical Reenactment Park. New ramps and benches had to be installed to transform the heritage of a 13th-15th century Kyivan Rus village to accessible design.

Read more about the *Ostvytsia Historical Reenactment Park* on page 36.

Right: Social inclusion in Rivne also means making activities accessible for war veterans. Sometimes this means rethinking how to use the centuries-old heritage of the city.



Left: The breach of the Kakhovka dam and continuous shelling of Nova Kakhovka has resulted in the destruction of many embroidered heritage buildings. Today, the traditional stone embroideres form a connection between residents who have fled the city, as workshops teaches how to preserve the unique craft.



Learning Lab II

Culture Under Threat – Partnerships, Risks and Opportunities in Ukraine's Regions

Under the theme “Engage and Activate,” RESCOM partners hosted their second Learning Lab, bringing together cultural and community actors from across the Baltic Sea Region and Ukraine.

Ukrainian representatives from **Khmelnyskyi, Okhtyrka, Nova Kakhovka, and Zhovkva** shared insights from communities facing the realities of war, enriching discussions on resilience, engagement, and youth inclusion.

THE FRONTLINE OF BELONGING

Opening the discussion, Ielizaveta Ievseieva, representing a coalition of NGOs, described how cultural workers and museum staff united from the first days of the full-scale invasion. Their mission is to document crimes against Ukrainian culture — from stolen heritage to destroyed archives — and to prepare legal cases.

In a dialogue with the moderator, the participants noted that they “speak not of occupied territories but of occupied communities. Without people, there is no heritage. As one of today’s speakers said, a shell without a snail inside is useless, i.e. it has nothing to preserve.”

For Ms Ievseieva, culture is inseparable from survival: the loss of human connection — families divided, lives cut short — is as grave a crime as the destruction of monuments. Yet she stressed that pre-war cultural networks repaid themselves ‘a thousand percent’: cultural actors stayed loyal, kept working, and even organised evacuations from occupied zones.

- **Culture is survival infrastructure.** It sustains belonging and identity when daily life is shattered.
- **Communities, not just territories, are occupied.** Heritage lives in people first, not in land or monuments.
- **Networks pay off in crisis.** Cultural workers active before 2022 became lifelines during the invasion.
- **Adaptation is creative.** From bomb-shelter galleries to embroidered gifts for newborns, culture carries on.
- **Long-term vision matters.** Stakeholders chose to complete a cultural strategy rather than divert funds, affirming identity over short-term relief.
- **Partnerships must be practical.** Tools communities can use matter more than symbolic gestures.
- **Dialogue with Russia is out of the question.** Cultural dialogue with Russia contradicts the very principles of art and humanity as true cultural dialogue cannot exist while one side is destroying the other.
- **Humour is allowed.** Dark comedy and creative fundraising show resilience in action.

EMBROIDERY AND EXILE: CONTINUITY FROM LUHANSK

From exile, Iryna Herasymchuk, representing Chmerivka village of the Luhansk region, brought the flag of her hometown — sunflower and corn — symbols of fertility now cut off by occupation. She introduced a 2025 ethnographic volume on Luhansk embroidery, wearing an embroidered shirt created by artist Yuliia Khatsanovska from Chmerivka.

Khatsanovska's current projects bring embroidery into life's most fragile moments: handmade garments for newborns in maternity wards and for wounded soldiers recovering in hospitals.

"Russians took our land; we cannot harvest. But the people kept the culture — and in some ways, it grows even faster now."

Iryna explained that the symbolism of embroidery — red for fire, blue for air — goes back to Scythian burials. Traditionally, a bride prepared twelve embroidered towels before marriage. Such traditions, she said, remain a thread of continuity even in displacement.

CREATING UNDER BOMBARDMENT

Olena Khmelnyk, a cultural leader from Rivne, spoke about adapting to war's impossible conditions.

"It is impossible to get used to war. But we have adapted. We have created

cultural spaces in bomb shelters. We opened an art gallery in a hospital basement. Culture became a way not only to grow, but to live."

Her municipality had just secured European Commission support to draft a cultural strategy when the full-scale invasion began. Funders allowed the remaining grant to be repurposed for humanitarian aid. In a remarkable decision, 200 local stakeholders unanimously chose to finish the strategy instead, raising separate funds for relief.

"People were united around values and vision. They did not want to suspend culture. Projects began even before council approval. It wasn't top-down — it was readiness."

For Ms Khmelnyk, the war paradoxically created new opportunities: capacity-building, digitisation of heritage, and small-scale repairs previously beyond reach.

PARTNERSHIPS THAT MATTER

Oleh Volskyi, Mayor of Zhovkva, argued that international partnerships must focus on practical, replicable tools. He also recalled that partners of his city did help them a lot and that they continue to build international partnerships.

COOPERATION WITH RUSSIA? "OUT OF QUESTION."

When an audience member asked whether cultural dialogue with Russian counterparts is possible, the responses were unanimous and emotional.

Tetyana Simchuk, the panel co-moderator, invoked the killing of writer Viktoriia Amelina by a Russian missile:

"Culture is a battlefield of values. It is important to remember that art cannot stand apart from politics or from war, especially when Russia continues to kill Ukrainian artists. The majority in Russia accepts or enables this war. Exceptions do not change the rule."

Others pointed to decades of cultural appropriation — Ukrainian figures claimed by Russia — and insisted that reconciliation can only follow accountability and change, not precede it.

HUMOUR AND SURVIVAL

Despite the grimness, panellists insisted on the right to laugh. Stand-up comedians fundraise abroad, sometimes auctioning Kyiv grass for hundreds of euros.

"It may sound strange, but laughter is normal during war. It helps us survive."

"After hearing you, I finally understand. Resilience is not only endurance — it is the ability to create, to organise, and to dream under impossible conditions."

Dark humour, they suggested, is itself an art form born of crisis.

A POLISH REFLECTION: FINALLY UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE

A Polish participant, living just 100 kilometres from the Ukrainian border, shared that she had recently experienced a drone attack. For the first time, she faced the same uncertainty Ukrainians live with every day — not knowing whether to take her children to school or start packing and flee.

She admitted that, until then, “resilience” had been a vague and almost untranslatable term.

“After hearing you, I finally understand. Resilience is not only endurance — it is the ability to create, to organise, and to dream under impossible conditions.”

The exchange ended in an embrace, and with a heartfelt appeal to treat Ukrainians not merely as recipients of aid, but as equals and partners.

WHAT TO TAKE AWAY

The panel’s message was clear: culture continues, transforms, and saves lives under war. It is not only about monuments but about the bonds that keep communities alive. Ukrainians asked partners not merely for sympathy, but for collaboration on practical, future-oriented cultural work.

As one speaker put it:

“We are strong. We are resilient. And we will win. But even now, culture is one of vital elements that keep us alive.” ■



Learning Lab III

The World Café

Using the “World Café” approach, the third Learning Lab incentivised participants to reflect on some of the toughest challenges when it comes to strengthening community resilience.

The conclusions gathered here are a result of the case studies done by the Cultural Pearls. The individual cases were brought together to find solutions to common problems and challenges in community projects.

#1

What helps people feel at home?

People feel at home when they experience a sense of belonging, often rooted in cultural connections, traditions, and shared activities. Feeling safe, being heard, and actively participating in community life—such as celebrations, co-creation, and local engagement—are key.

Personal connections, cultural habits, and spaces where individuals can share and be understood foster this sense of home. Small, inclusive actions

and re-learning traditions also play a vital role in creating comfort and ownership within a community.

#2

Culture as everyday civic strength

Culture strengthens civic life by bringing people together through shared memories, traditions, and generational exchange. It creates a sense of identity and safe expression, especially for children and marginalized groups. Participating in cultural activities—like storytelling, community events, and creative practices—builds resilience and fosters a collective “at home” feeling, reinforcing social bonds and community cohesion.

#3

Big impact on a small budget

Even with limited resources, meaningful engagement can be achieved through volunteerism, activism, and small, creative actions. Examples include community clean-ups, local

NGO initiatives, and “out-of-the-box” projects like Finland’s open-house initiative in Kaskinen-Kaskö. The focus is on leveraging existing assets—such as public spaces, local knowledge, and passionate individuals—to create impact without significant funding.

#4

What prevents people from taking part

Fear of judgment, failure, and lack of encouragement often deter participation. People may hesitate due to past experiences, stereotypes, or feeling unwelcome in new or anonymous



settings. Overcoming these barriers requires creating safe, inclusive environments, starting with small steps, and normalizing mistakes as part of the learning process. Building trust and relatability is essential to encourage broader engagement.

#5

Finding the resources we already have

Communities can tap into existing resources by knowing their members, utilizing public spaces, and leveraging local knowledge—such as schools, parks, and elders. Libraries, NGOs, and community leaders are valuable assets. The key is to share resources equitably, ask for help, and recognize that collaboration and creativity can expand what’s available.

#6

Telling our stories in ways that speak to people

Effective storytelling requires authenticity, clarity, and relatability. Stories

should focus on real experiences, use understandable language, and be shared through diverse formats—like interviews, translations, and expert-led discussions. Aesthetic and passionate delivery helps connect with audiences, making cultural narratives more engaging and impactful.

#7

Everyday creativity brings people together

Creativity in daily life—such as brainstorming, public events, and small creative acts—fosters connection and breaks monotony. Simple activities like discussing food, decorating spaces, or setting up creative corners in refugee centers or libraries build community. A relaxed, inclusive atmosphere encourages participation and strengthens social bonds.

#8

Building trust through shared experiences

Trust grows when people share experiences, respect differences, and connect authentically. Libraries, open spaces, and community events facilitate these interactions.

Professional facilitators can help navigate difficult topics, while initiatives like *Coffee with a Local* or community walks create safe spaces for dialogue. Decentralization and respect for diverse backgrounds further enhance trust and inclusion.



#9

When systems make things harder

Bureaucracy, rigid hierarchies, and financial constraints often hinder community initiatives. Overcoming these challenges requires flexibility, merging departments, and empowering communities to take ownership. Crises can create opportunities for innovation, and flexible funding or community boards can help bridge gaps between regulations and grass-roots creativity.

#10

Imagining the community we want to grow

An ideal community is inclusive, flexible, and communicative, where everyone—including newcomers—feels valued and heard. Open dialogue between municipalities and residents, welcoming spaces, and opportunities for direct participation are crucial. The goal is to create a harmonious, non-anonymous environment where people can face challenges together and grow as a collective.

THE LIBRARY: A HUB FOR RESILIENCE

Public libraries and cultural institutions are crucial meeting places for interpersonal dialogue and informal learning. They serve a critical role in supporting community resilience and social cohesion—both in times of conflict and peace. During crisis, the role of the public library is further amplified as a sanctuary for cultural identity, psychological support and collective emotional healing.

Learnings from the RESCOM project have highlighted how exchanges of practices can support public libraries develop new activities for inclusion, preparedness and cultural resilience.



Cultural destruction, civil society recovery, and the role of public libraries in post-occupation Ukraine: the case of Kapitolivka, Kharkiv Region

On 12 March 2022, five days after Russian forces entered the village of **Kapitolivka** in Kharkiv region, Yuliia Kakulia-Danyliuk walked alone to her library and let herself in with her key. Russian soldiers had forced entry through a side door connected to the kindergarten, but had not tried the main entrance. She had.

Inside, she found books scattered across the floor, computers smashed, children's theatre costumes and bedding discarded in the courtyard. When she asked the soldiers why the premises had been destroyed, they denied responsibility. The building, they said, had already been in that condition when they arrived.

She returned twice more before leaving the village on 8 April 2022. Each visit was worse than the last. **Her account of what she saw is one of the most detailed first-hand records of cultural destruction carried out by Russian occupying forces** — and, as the pattern of damage makes clear, it was not incidental.

THE VILLAGE AND ITS LIBRARY

Kapitolivka is a small rural settlement in the Iziium district of Kharkiv region, northeastern Ukraine. The village has a population of several hundred residents and is situated far from the regional capital and its cultural institutions. In communities of this size and remove, a public library is rarely one cultural option among several. **It is typically the only one.**

Before the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2022, Kapitolivka had no dedicated community or cultural centre. The village library, housed in the same building as the local kindergarten, was the only organised public space available to residents of all ages.

Kakulia-Danyliuk joined the library in 2015 and built its cultural programme from the ground up — without grant funding, which required an NGO she did not have, and largely without state support.

The library ran a full calendar of events — themed evenings, readings for all age groups, community celebrations. Much of this cultural life was woven around Volodymyr Vakulenko, a local writer whose work included poetry,

children's books, and titles printed in Braille for visually impaired readers. Vakulenko knew writers across Ukraine and used his connections to bring them to Kapitolivka.

Vakulenko had long warned that the war in Donbas would reach Kharkiv region. Most people dismissed this. "They would say: who needs you there, who would kill you? Just sit quietly and everything will be fine," Kakulia-Danyliuk recalls. He was not wrong.



Photos: Yuliia Kakulia-Danyliuk

THE OCCUPATION

Russian forces entered Kapitolivka on 7 March 2022. A tank column arrived at around 16:00; the following day, soldiers began requisitioning homes and public buildings. Kakulia-Danyliuk found that communication with family — including her son, evacuated with her parents on 24 February, and her husband, already serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces — was reduced to delayed SMS messages. “5 March — I’m alive,” she would write. They would write back the same.

The physical destruction of the library was extensive. Books were burned inside the building, windows were broken, then blocked with stacked books. Walls were covered in graffiti. Computer equipment was destroyed.

The most telling detail is what was done to the Ukrainian-language materials. Books on Ukrainian history, culture, and national identity were removed from the shelves and deposited in the building’s toilet facilities. “I can say this with certainty from what I saw,” Kakulia-Danyliuk says. “It was done on purpose.”

This pattern — the targeted destruction of Ukrainian cultural materials while other items were left in place — has been documented across multiple occupied territories in Kharkiv, Kherson, and other regions. It is consistent with a broader strategy aimed

at the erasure of Ukrainian cultural identity, which Russian occupation authorities have pursued systematically since 2014 in the Donbas and since 2022 across the newly occupied territories.

On 24 March 2022, seventeen days into the occupation, Vakulenko was detained by Russian forces. He did not survive. His remains were later found in a mass grave near the village. A diary he had buried in his garden before his arrest was subsequently recovered and published, largely through the efforts of writer and human rights investigator Viktoriia Amelina, who came to Kapitolivka specifically to document Russian war crimes.

When Kakulia-Danyliuk returned to assess the library in November 2022, two months after liberation, she found conditions worse than anything she had seen during the occupation. Broken windows had allowed rainwater to enter the building, and water was leaking onto the remaining books. Of the pre-invasion collection of 16,000 volumes, approximately 4,500 were recoverable. The rest — more than 11,500 books — had been destroyed or rendered unusable. Eight residents of Kapitolivka were documented as having been tortured and killed during the occupation.

It was at this point that Ariane Chemin, a journalist from the French newspaper *Le Monde*, came to



photograph the destroyed library. She was accompanying a group covering the return of Vakulenko’s family to the village. “I was standing there in the ruins, and she told me: I’m certain your library will be rebuilt and will be even better,” Kakulia-Danyliuk recalls. “At the time I just thought: what? Everything is destroyed, there’s nothing left.” The prediction proved accurate.

Chemin returned unannounced in 2025, walked into a women’s club meeting in progress, and found the library fully functioning.

REBUILDING WITHOUT STATE SUPPORT

In the immediate aftermath of liberation, Ukraine’s state recovery programmes focused on schools,

kindergartens, and physical infrastructure. Libraries were not a priority. Faced with that gap, Kakulia-Danyliuk began the work herself. She and a friend physically cleared the building — washing by hand everything that could be washed, hauling out the debris of six months of occupation. “It was a condition of the renovation that the space had to be clean first.”

In 2024, the **Room for Heritage project** — implemented by IZOLYATSIA together with Mystetskyi Arsenal, the Kharkiv Literary Museum, and the Odesa National Art Museum, and funded by the Partnership Fund for a Resilient Ukraine (PFRU) — funded the renovation of the library’s remaining two completed rooms and replaced the destroyed furniture. The **Library Without Borders initiative** supplied a laptop, tablets for children, a projector, and a printer. The Dobrochinets foundation, the Kharkiv Literary Museum, Old Lion Publishing, and other civil society organisations contributed book donations.

To date, no state funding has been allocated to the library’s restoration. Everything has come from civil society organisations, private volunteers, and international partners. “The universe heard my suffering,” Kakulia-Danyliuk says, “and sent me very good people.”

Viktoriiia Amelina, before her death, used every available platform to speak about the library — at international

conferences, in media interviews, at literary events abroad. She was killed on 1 July 2023 when a Russian missile struck a restaurant in Kramatorsk during a dinner with a group of international writers and journalists. She was 37. “Viktoriiia became very close to me,” Kakulia-Danyliuk says. “This loss is, for me, like losing a sister.”

A LIBRARY TRANSFORMED

The library that emerged from the reconstruction is fundamentally different from what existed before the war — not only in the scale of its collection, but in the role it now plays.

With the village school and kindergarten unable to operate in person due to the proximity of active hostilities, the library has become the only communal space available to Kapitolivka’s roughly 100 remaining children. It now hosts first-grade classes: a teacher comes in, children arrive, and they work using the tablets and internet connection provided through the Library Without Borders initiative. Keys are held by the kindergarten teaching staff and the school’s deputy headteacher, so the space can be used whenever it is needed. Daily programming includes creative activities, physical games, and structured social interaction. Clinical psychologists visit regularly to provide support for children experiencing trauma from the occupation and the ongoing conflict. “There is a great need for this,” Kakulia-Danyliuk says.

“Our children are wounded.”

Adult residents use the library too. Women from the village — survivors of the occupation, some of them bereaved — meet there to share experiences and support one another. Community discussions and commemorative gatherings take place in rooms that were used to house occupying soldiers two years ago.

The library’s collection is also being rebuilt with a different character. Russian-language volumes have been set aside for recycling, pending the availability of a processing facility in Izium. Demand is now almost entirely for Ukrainian-language materials. “People are asking for Ukrainian books,” Kakulia-Danyliuk observes. “Not for Russian ones. The opposite.”

OUTLOOK

The question of whether to evacuate the village — and its newly restored library — is one that Kakulia-Danyliuk cannot currently answer. “Nobody knows what to do or where to move anything. It will fall on people’s shoulders, as it always does.”

Two of the library’s four rooms have been renovated. Two remain unrestored, awaiting funding. “I never thought I was so strong,” she says, “that I could go into the lion’s den of the occupiers for my books. That I could travel hundreds of kilometres to

organise things, to find someone to transport the books home.”

The Kapitolivka library is now more than a library. It functions simultaneously as a classroom, a children’s activity centre, a psychological support hub, a repository for collections evacuated from other threatened communities, and a site of collective memory. This expanded role is not unique to Kapitolivka: across the liberated territories of Kharkiv, Kherson, and other regions, rural libraries have stepped into the gaps left by the destruction of other public institutions, largely without state support and largely through the efforts of individual librarians who refused to leave.

“I hope it will become a cultural hub,” Kakulia-Danyliuk says, “that will inspire our residents to create a new Ukraine — a flourishing, real Ukraine, without the admixture of Russianisms, foreign history, foreign thoughts.” ■



Learning creativity from crisis

REFLECTIONS FROM HÄRNÖSAND LIBRARY

As project participants and employees at Härnösand Library, our work centres on reaching broader audiences, include a wider range of perspectives, and contribute to increased understanding and closeness between countries and societies. Our work is grounded in the conviction that **libraries and cultural institutions are central actors in promoting democracy, social cohesion, and societal resilience.** Through international and regional exchanges of experience, we strengthen our own organization while also contributing to knowledge sharing at a local level.

An important part of the RESCOM project for us has been the network meetings with our partners and stakeholders, during which we have heard stories about **how libraries and cultural settings have functioned as lifelines during times of crisis and conflict.** Several Ukrainian actors have particularly emphasized the importance of interpersonal encounters—places where people can gather, share everyday activities, and at the same time create space for conver-

sation, processing, and community. Examples highlighted include handcraft groups, where the practical work provides calm and focus, while the conversations allow both the sharing of difficult experiences and a temporary break from the realities of war.

These stories have had a direct impact on our local activities.

Inspired by the Ukrainian experiences, we have already, among other things, tested a few forms of collaboration with the local handcraft association. With the help of the library's resources—such as premises, staff,



and marketing—we are able to offer space, literature, and an open setting where anyone who is curious, regardless of prior knowledge, can try textile handicrafts together with like-minded participants and more experienced practitioners. The activities are combined with reading aloud and conversation and function as **low-threshold initiatives where culture, creativity, and social interaction meet**. The initiative contributes to increased community cohesion and offers a safe meeting place where participants can share experiences, learn from one another, and strengthen social bonds.

A LIBRARY FOR AND BY YOUTH

Another lesson we have taken with us concerns the participation of children and young people in the local community. Many of the presentations we attended during our gathering in Płock in September 2025 highlighted youth engagement as a crucial factor in building sustainable and inclusive societies. We were given several examples of projects in which young people, in close collaboration with municipal officials and cultural actors, have jointly developed places and other kinds of contexts for and with young people. These processes have been shown to strengthen a **sense of participation, influence, and ownership**, and have given both the young participants and the wider local

community pride in what they have created together.

Inspired by these examples, we have initiated several similar efforts within the core activities of Härnösand Library. We are now actively working to ensure that children and young people themselves are involved in developing the library. This includes involving them in the design of library spaces, in the development of programme activities with a focus on sustainability issues, and in the creation of creative environments and content.

One activity high on our wish list was to provide training to both library staff and a number of young people as reading leaders in shared reading—a social form of reading aloud that includes conversation and reflection. This training was completed in spring 2026 and can now be implemented through shared reading activities for all age groups, led by engaged reading leaders. Among these is a fifteen-year-old girl from Ukraine who is now aiming to lead a shared reading group in Ukrainian, in cooperation with the local folk high school. **By giving young people genuine influence, we strengthen their engagement and self-confidence**, while at the same time developing the library as a relevant and vibrant meeting place for the future.

LEARNING FROM KHARKIV

There is also a story that has had a particularly profound impact on us, both as individuals and as library professionals, and above all on how we view our work and our entire organization. Learning about the work of the library in Kapitolivka in the Kharkiv region following its occupation by Russian troops in 2022 led us to reassess what we consider to be the core strength of libraries.

During the past year, the municipality of Härnösand has been working to develop its preparedness for crisis and war, and all municipal units are required to produce continuity plans to ensure that operations can continue without major interruptions or disruptions.

When we at the library began this work, much of our thinking revolved around how we should protect the collections and what was most important to preserve. Based on Kakulia-Danyliuk's experiences, the focus of our work shifted and now primarily concerns **how we can create a place and content that support our residents**.

Books are, of course, central to library services, as was also evident in the Kharkiv region, but in the event of a crisis or war, our most important task would instead be **to offer people a sense of context, a creative platform, normality, and a hub for information and conversation**.



A tangible example of the power of shared experiences and stories became apparent at a regional meeting with crisis preparedness coordinators, attended also by communications officers from all municipalities in the region. During a short presentation, we chose to highlight the events surrounding the library in Kapitolivka. Through images from the period after the occupation, we showed how Russian soldiers had used the library's premises for eight months. The visual material deeply affected the participants and created a noticeable silence in the room. When we then showed how the library has since been rebuilt and is used today, it sparked many questions and in-depth discussions.

A day that had primarily focused on technical aspects of crisis preparedness—such as water supply, shelters, and transportation—was given a broader purpose. Through the story of the occupation of Kapitolivka and the local library, new perspectives were added, clearly illustrating the importance of culture, meeting places, and social interaction for societal resilience. The project has thus demonstrated not only that libraries are places for information, **but also that libraries and culture can be crucial resources in building long-term societal resilience—both in times of peace and in times of crisis.** ■

Heritage and social inclusion

THE CASE OF OSTVYTSIA HISTORICAL REENACTMENT PARK

The “Ostvytsia” Historical Reenactment Park in Rivne, Ukraine, is an open-air cultural and educational initiative dedicated to the authentic recreation of an 11th-12th century Kyivan Rus settlement.

The initiative promotes cultural heritage preservation, historical education, sustainable tourism, and community-driven conservation efforts. It has also set an example for enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities, reinforcing inclusivity as an ongoing priority.

The park is divided into economic, entertaining, and authentic zones, each meticulously designed to reflect the daily life of medieval Ukraine. Traditional crafts workshops, historical reenactments and boat tours in reconstructed vessels are among the park's main activities.

The project has significantly strengthened Ukrainian cultural identity by reviving historical traditions and raising



public awareness of national heritage. By immersing visitors in the daily life of Kyivan Rus, the park fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of history, making cultural education both engaging and accessible.

Education and engagement form a core aspect of the park's success. It serves as a vibrant educational hub, attracting schools, universities, and cultural institutions. Through lectures, workshops, and masterclasses, it provides hands-on learning experiences that bring history to life for people of all ages and backgrounds.

The park has also played a crucial role in stimulating tourism and economic growth. By offering unique historical experiences, it draws thousands of visitors annually, contributing to the local economy and providing new opportunities for artisans, performers, and local businesses.

Environmental conservation is another significant achievement of the initiative. Through clean-up campaigns and tree-planting efforts, the project has helped restore local ecosystems, demonstrating the positive interplay between cultural heritage and nature conservation.

Finally, the park has fostered community-driven development. By inspiring local authorities to support independent civic heritage projects, it has contributed to regional conservation policies and encouraged a more active and engaged civil society.

THE POWER OF BALANCE

Launched in 2025, the *Power of Balance* project is part of a broader cultural development programme aimed at combining rehabilitation, inclusion, and cultural heritage.



Its main target groups are veterans, people with disabilities, and individuals undergoing rehabilitation, particularly those with musculoskeletal disorders. The overarching aim has been to provide opportunities for adaptive water sports, traditional crafts, and cultural experiences that strengthen both physical and emotional well-being.

Bridging cultural heritage and inclusive practices, the project has adapted activities of the park—from archery and paddling to a digital accessibility map and virtual tour—to modern and accessible infrastructure. Adaptive paddling in kayaks and reconstructed historical boats was found as an innovative solution to giving participants access to the water, while preserving as much historical authenticity as possible.

Veterans and participants reported that water activities created a

sense of freedom and calm, helping them to cope with trauma. People with mobility impairments highlighted the importance of being included in cultural and historical experiences, rather than being excluded due to physical barriers.

The name of the project, “The Power of Balance”, resonated strongly with participants. It reflects both the physical skill required for paddling and the deeper metaphor of seeking balance in life after trauma or disability.

Ostvytsia and *The Power of Balance* exemplify how cultural heritage can become a force for social inclusion and resilience. By combining history, nature, and innovative programming, the park not only preserves Ukraine's past but also empowers its present and future. ■



POST-PARTICIPATION STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

Stakeholders from the RESCOM project described the project as highly positive, meaningful, and motivating, emphasising:

- Exposure to new approaches and practices
- Learning from other cities and countries
- Reinforcement of the social role of culture and creativity

Project participants and stakeholders from cultural, community, and institutional backgrounds perceived the RESCOM project as highly relevant and impactful. Among its strongest effects, stakeholders emphasised **opportunities for idea generation, networking and value alignment**.

Respondents found the project to have **strong personal and professional impact**. This included expanded professional networks, new ideas for projects and institutional development, reinforced belief in the quality and resilience of Ukrainian development, and a strengthened worldview regarding the role of culture in identity-building and resilience.

How comfortable and useful was the format of the learning laboratories?



How effective were the RESCOM laboratories and forums for networking and exchanging ideas?



Endnotes

1 Ministry of Culture of Ukraine: 1,630 cultural heritage sites and 2,437 cultural infrastructure facilities in Ukraine have been damaged due to Russia's aggression, 04.12.2025. <https://mincult.gov.ua/en/news/1630-cultural-heritage-sites-and-2437-cultural-infrastructure-facilities-in-ukraine-have-been-damaged-due-to-russias-aggression/>

2 BSR Cultural Pearls and RESCOM: From practice to method. Cultural practices as a toolkit for community resilience - BSR Cultural Pearls & RESCOM case studies. https://culturalpearls.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/BSR_Cultural-Pearls_SecuringCulture_A4booklet_2026.pdf