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# ‘Heritage is not about the past’: how Ukraine’s museum community is talking about decolonisation today

**The Ukrainian-language edition of the international guide *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums: Focus on Ukraine* was presented at the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. Following the presentation, museum professionals from across Ukraine came together for a closed workshop to discuss how deeply imperial narratives remain embedded in collections, exhibitions, catalogues and the language used by museums.**

The workshop brought together representatives of museums, cultural heritage institutions and civil society organisations from different cities and regions of Ukraine, including Odesa, Lviv, Kharkiv region, Nikopol and Zhytomyr region. The discussion explored where Ukraine's museum sector stands today: what is already changing in everyday practice, where a shared language and methods are still lacking, and where more decisive action is needed.

# Decolonisation begins with experience

For many participants, the path towards decolonisation did not begin with theory. More often, it was prompted by a particular experience: working with an archive, encountering the conflation of Ukraine and Russia, finding an attribution error or an outdated description of a museum object, or suddenly recognising an imperial narrative in a familiar exhibition. For many, 2014 was a turning point, and especially February 2022, with the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

# Rethinking Ukraine in all its diversity

Another theme was the need to rethink Ukraine itself — not as a homogeneous whole, but as a diverse country shaped by regional histories, local experiences, different identities and distinct paths of historical development.

For museums, this means moving away from a single, flattened narrative. Ukrainian history needs a language capable of reflecting its many voices without allowing them to disappear into imperial generalisations.

# The museum as a space for interpretation

Participants repeatedly returned to the changing role of museums. Museums are increasingly understood not only as places where memory is preserved, but also as spaces for interpretation, public dialogue and cultural security.

Where the emphasis was once often placed on facts, events and biographies, attention is now shifting towards context, motivations, the complexity of individual choices, and questions about whose perspective is being represented.

'Decolonisation is not a process where you can simply tick a box,' says Anastasiia Cherednychenko, President of ICOM Ukraine. 'Decolonisation is about rethinking — whether that means rethinking a museum collection or history itself.'

# The challenge lies in how history is interpreted

The greatest difficulties often lie not in the historical facts themselves, but in how they are understood and presented. Working with mixed Ukrainian-Russian collections, the legacy of the Soviet period and historical figures whose biographies are closely intertwined with the history of the Russian Empire can be particularly complex. These include Ivan Mazepa, Kostiantyn Ostrozkyi and Petro Mohyla.

‘All of these figures went through a certain repressive machinery of Russian propaganda at the Lavra and were effectively diminished or turned into negative aspects of history,’ explains Maksym Ostapenko, Director General of the National Preserve ‘Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra’. According to Ostapenko, one of the tasks facing the museum community today is to present an objective history of Ukraine as part of European cultural heritage.

The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, for example, is going through a similar process of reassessment. As recently as 2021, visitors could reach it on a minibus displaying the words ‘Final stop — Museum of the Great Patriotic War’. Today, the museum speaks of ‘re-signification’ — a transformation that goes beyond its name or individual terms and extends to the conceptual foundations of its work.

# The challenge of sources

Participants also identified sources as a significant challenge. Many of the catalogues, attributions and reference materials needed to research Ukrainian collections have historically been held in Russia or produced within the Russian academic tradition. As a result, research into and attribution of Ukrainian heritage still partly relies on sources produced within an intellectual environment that itself requires critical reassessment.

This applies not only to broad historical narratives, but also to everyday museum practice: object descriptions, place names, transliteration, names of artistic schools, authorship and provenance. It is at this level that colonial structures can be reproduced almost unnoticed — or, conversely, gradually changed.

# The willingness is there — the tools are not always

The discussion made clear that Ukraine’s cultural sector already has a strong awareness of the importance of decolonisation. The greater challenge is turning that understanding into sustained practice.

Participants spoke about a lack of methodological resources, professional training, relevant skills, research infrastructure, staff time and funding. They also highlighted the need for a shared language for discussing difficult subjects — one that allows museums to work carefully with context without oversimplifying or labelling it.

# A long process — but not a reason to wait

Participants repeatedly returned to the idea that decolonisation is an open-ended, long-term process with no universal answers. At the same time, they cautioned that the length of this process should not become an excuse for delay. In wartime, reflection alone is not enough: institutions also need to be ready to review their own practices now.

‘Decolonisation is a very long process,’ says Tetiana Filevska, Deputy Minister of Culture of Ukraine. ‘But the sooner we begin this process, the sooner we will reach our goal.’

# A guide now available in Ukrainian

The guide *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums: Focus on Ukraine* is intended as a practical tool for this work. It is the result of almost three years of collaboration between the Ukrainian Institute, ICOM UK, ICOM Ukraine and the Museums Association, with support from the British Council. It consists of two parts: a practical section providing context, examples and resources, and a collection of specially commissioned essays exploring key themes.

The English-language edition was published in 2025. It has already become part of professional conversations in the UK, informing exhibition practice, training for museum teams, reviews of catalogues and the ways in which Ukrainian cultural heritage is described. Published in 2026, the Ukrainian-language edition brings these resources to audiences in Ukraine while also highlighting the kinds of information about Ukraine that many international readers still need.

According to Maria Blyzinsky, Co-Chair of ICOM UK, the guide offers British museum professionals, above all, a different perspective — not that of the coloniser, but of those living with the legacy of colonisation. ‘It is a model which, we hope, can be used by other peoples dealing with a history of colonial oppression,’ she says.

The workshop was not intended to provide definitive answers. Rather, it showed that Ukraine’s museum community is no longer asking whether decolonisation is necessary. The question now is how to make it a systematic part of museum practice — with a shared language, appropriate methods and resources, and an understanding of the diversity of Ukrainian experience.

*The workshop took place in June 2026. It was organised by the British Council and moderated by Karina Fursa.*