

On the Way to the National Digital Library of Ukraine: The Collaboration of Memory Institutions, the State, and NGOs in Preserving Cultural Heritage in Wartime

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Abstract. Preserving and providing access to national documentary heritage is essential for safeguarding national memory and identity, particularly during wartime. Since the launch of its military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, which escalated into a full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia has severely damaged or destroyed numerous cultural heritage sites, placing many more at imminent risk. The article presents a model for the creation of the National Digital Library of Ukraine, analyzing how memory institutions, the Ukrainian government, and NGOs coordinate their efforts to preserve the country’s cultural heritage despite the ongoing war. It also examines the challenges and success of the project, emphasizing the resilience of cultural institutions and the transformative potential of digital technology in preserving national heritage under threat. The study has shown that the establishment of centralized, standardized digital workflows, secure distributed data, and interoperable metadata schemes is necessary to ensure the protection, accessibility, and secure integration of cultural assets into both national and international research infrastructures. Furthermore, the sustainable digitization and long-term preservation of Ukraine’s endangered documentary heritage require a cohesive and multi-stakeholder framework that involves memory institutions, government agencies, and NGOs.

Keywords: National Digital Library of Ukraine, documentary heritage, preservation, safeguarding cultural heritage, Russo–Ukrainian war.

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Ukrainos nacionalinės skaitmeninės bibliotekos kūrimas: atminties institucijų, valstybinių ir nevyriausybinių organizacijų bendradarbiavimas išsaugant kultūros paveldą karo metu

Santrauka. Nacionalinio dokumentinio paveldo išsaugojimas ir prieigos prie jo užtikrinimas yra būtini siekiant apsaugoti nacionalinę atmintį ir tapatybę, ypač karo metu. Nuo 2014 m., kai Rusija pradėjo karinę agresiją prieš Ukrainą, o 2022 m. ši agresija peraugo į invaziją, buvo smarkiai apgadinta arba sunaikinta daugybė Ukrainos kultūros paveldo objektų; dar daugiau jų gresia neišvengiamas pavojus. Straipsnyje aptariamas Ukrainos nacionalinės skaitmeninės bibliotekos modelis, analizuojama, kaip atminties institucijos, Ukrainos vyriausybė ir nevyriausybinių organizacijų koordinuoja savo veiksmus siekdamas išsaugoti šalies kultūrinį paveldą vykstant karui. Taip pat nagrinėjami šio projekto iššūkiai ir pasiekimai, pabrėžiamas šalies kultūros institucijų atsparumas ir skaitmeninių technologijų potencialas bandant išsaugoti nacionalinį paveldą. Tyrimas parodė, kad siekiant užtikrinti kultūros vertybių apsaugą, prieinamumą ir saugią jų integraciją tiek į nacionalines, tiek į tarptautines mokslinių tyrimų infrastruktūras, būtina sukurti centralizuotą, standartizuotą skaitmeninę darbo aplinką, užtikrinti patikimą duomenų saugojimą ir metaduomenų naudojimą. Be to, tvarus pavojuje esančio dokumentinio paveldo skaitmeninimas ir ilgalaikis išsaugojimas reikalauja nuoseklios, daugelį suinteresuotųjų šalių apimančios sistemos, kurioje dalyvautų atminties institucijos, valstybinės bei nevyriausybinių organizacijos.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Ukrainos nacionalinė skaitmeninė biblioteka, dokumentinis paveldas, išsaugojimas, kultūros paveldo apsauga, Rusijos–Ukrainos karas.

Introduction

The preservation of cultural heritage is crucial for sustaining one's national identity, collective memory, and historical continuity during wartimes.¹ The russian² occupation of a part of Ukraine in 2014 and the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, have posed a significant threat not only to the Ukrainian people but also to the country's cultural heritage, highlighting the need for proactive preservation measures. Libraries, archives, museums, and other memory institutions in Ukraine are facing unprecedented challenges, as many collections have been damaged, destroyed, or displaced.³ As a result of these disruptions, safeguarding Ukraine's cultural heritage and ensuring its accessibility to future generations has become an urgent priority.

To address these challenges, the National Digital Library of Ukraine (hereinafter, NDLU) project has emerged as a strategic initiative to digitize, preserve, and centralize the country's documentary and cultural heritage. In addition to protecting valuable cultural resources, the NDLU will be accessible to the global community through a collaborative network of memory institutions, state authorities, and non-governmental organizations (hereinafter, NGOs). Achieving this initiative will ensure both the preservation and dissemination of information about Ukraine's cultural identity, safeguarding its heritage, while promoting global awareness and access to its rich cultural heritage.⁴

¹ See more, *Towards Sustainable Preservation and Accessibility of Documentary Heritage* / Ed. F. Banda. Paris: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380171> [accessed 24/01/2026].

² Hereinafter, the lowercase spelling of "russia" and "russians" reflects the principled stance of the authors, in accordance with the clarifications provided by the Ukraine's National Commission on State Language Standards. See Написання назв "російська федерація": [опубліковано 20 вересня 2023 року]. Національна комісія зі стандартів державної мови. Retrieved from <https://nova.gov.ua/news/napysannia-nazv-rosiiska-federatsiia> [accessed 24/01/2026].

³ Cf. Chorna, T. Ukrainian Libraries in the Time of War: Losses and Challenges. *Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues*, 2023, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 84–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09557490231183625>.

⁴ See, e.g., Початок проекту створення Національної електронної бібліотеки України за підтримки ЮНЕСКО та ІФЛА. Українська бібліотечна асоціація, 17 February 2023. Retrieved from <https://ula.org.ua/novyny-ta-podii/novyny/5078-pocha-tok-proiektu-stvorennia-natsionalnoi-elektronnoi-biblioteki-ukrainy-za-pidtrymky-yunesko-ta-ifla> [accessed 24/01/2026].

The NDLU project integrates government policy, international partnerships, and non-profit advocacy.⁵ As Ukrainian culture faces destruction and misinformation, the NDLU extends its mission beyond archiving in order to defend truth, history, and cultural resilience.⁶ By documenting and digitizing Ukraine's rich and diverse documental heritage, the NDLU project is poised to preserve archive documents, manuscripts, incunabula, paleotypes, early printed books, periodicals, analog audiovisual documents, and e-publications that are essential to Ukraine's cultural evolution and identity.

This paper explores the collaborative model of the NDLU, highlighting the joint efforts of memory institutions, the Ukrainian government, and NGOs in order to preserve the country's cultural heritage despite the adversities of war. It also investigates the challenges and success of the project, emphasizing the resilience of the country's cultural institutions and the transformative potential of digital technology in preserving national heritage under threat.

The issue of safeguarding Ukraine's cultural and documentary heritage in the context of the ongoing war has been a trending topic of research for Ukrainian academic and memory institutions, as well as international organizations. The authors of the article "International Cooperation Programme for the Preservation of Ukrainian Cultural Heritage in the Context of Armed Conflict," emphasize the critical need to develop digital infrastructure, update legal frameworks, and strengthen coordination between international and national institutions to safeguard Ukraine's cultural heritage during wartime.⁷ However, Diána Vonnák, Siân Jones, Josephine Rasmussen, and Samuel Hardy also highlight that the effective protection of cultural heritage during wartime depends on aligning national legislation with international frameworks, such as the 1954 and 1970 UNESCO conventions, as well as on strengthened international cooperation and targeted financial support.⁸

According to Lily Ward and Tarek Teba, community engagement is crucial in safeguarding tangible and intangible cultural heritage amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. Drawing on literature reviews, reports, media, semi-structured interviews (including representatives from Renovation Map and ICOMOS), and survey data from SUCHO and ARCH, their study evaluates the methods and effectiveness of local safeguarding efforts.⁹ Iryna Druzhkova and Olga Kolesnyk examine the legal instruments and international frameworks dedicated to preserving cultural heritage during wartime, focusing specifically on the 1954 Hague Convention, the 1970 UNESCO Convention, and national legislation. They conclude that while international conventions provide crucial guidelines for safeguarding cultural assets and ensuring restitution, national legal frameworks vary significantly in enforcement and effectiveness. Emphasizing that countries aligned with international standards achieve better outcomes, the authors advocate for strengthening international collaboration, refining Ukraine's domestic legislation, and prioritizing funding and technical assistance for post-conflict recovery and heritage protection.¹⁰

⁵ Cf. Malys, N.; Shevchenko, V.; Tkachuk-Miroshnychenko, O. State Policy in the Sphere of Protection of Cultural Heritage in Ukraine. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 2021, Vol. 11 No. 3, p. 262–279, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-03-2020-0047>.

⁶ See more, Roush, L. L. R. *Heritage under Threat: Documentation Methods for Preserving At-risk Cultural Identity and Prosecuting Cultural Heritage War Crimes during the Russo-Ukrainian War*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University: Communities in JScholarship, 2023. Retrieved from <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/69553> [accessed 24/01/2026].

⁷ Boyko, L.; Polishchuk, L.; Pashkevych, M. International Cooperation Programme for the Preservation of Ukrainian Cultural Heritage in the Context of Armed Conflict. *Art History & Criticism*, 2025, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 102–114, <https://doi.org/10.2478/mik-2025-0008>.

⁸ Vonnák, D.; Jones, S.; Rasmussen, J.; Hardy, S. *Mobilising Care for Cultural Heritage in Russia's War Against Ukraine*. Stirling: University of Stirling, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.34722/n9m2-tv84>.

⁹ Ward, L.; Teba, T. Heritage in the Time of Conflict: An Evaluation of the Communities' Role in Safeguarding Cultural Heritage in Ukraine. In: *The Conservation and Sustainable Development of Architectural and Urban Heritage: Interpretation, Assessment of Significance and Enhancement Strategies* / Eds. E. Pilia, D. R. Fiorino, T. Teba. Cham: Springer, 2026, p. 237–266, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-17752-0_17.

¹⁰ Druzhkova, I.; Kolesnyk, O. War and Cultural Heritage: Legal Instruments for Preservation. *Buletinul Științific al Universității de Stat "Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu" din Cahul, Seria "Științe Umanistice"*, 2025, Vol. 22, No. 2, p. 133–148. Retrieved from <https://repo.odmu.edu.ua:443/xmlui/handle/123456789/18768> [accessed 24/01/2026].

Although individual studies have documented institutional practices, community protection efforts, and emergency digitization initiatives, the specific collaboration required for a unified national framework remains underexplored. Maryna Shevchenko and Alla Solianyuk analyze the current trends and practices in the digitization of documentary heritage across leading scientific libraries in Ukraine. Based on survey results, the authors evaluate search functionalities, user access modes (public, restricted, and local), and registration procedures for full-text digital repositories. The study supports the need for a National Program for the Digitization of Documentary Heritage, implemented at the corporate level, and concludes with practical recommendations to enhance the efficiency of library digitization, improve search tools, and streamline user access to digital collections.¹¹

Despite the recognized importance, high relevance, and growing number of publications addressing the preservation of Ukraine's cultural heritage, significant gaps remain regarding the practical coordination and interaction among memory institutions, state authorities, and NGOs. While the conceptual establishment of the NDLU has been debated for years, the systemic mechanisms for its implementation under wartime constraints have received insufficient empirical and academic investigation in current scholarly discourse.

The article consists of four parts. It begins by examining the severe threats and physical destruction inflicted on Ukraine's cultural infrastructure and memory institutions by Russian armed aggression. It then presents empirical survey data detailing the current, highly limited state of digitization across the nation's scientific and memory libraries. Following this, the article analyzes the collaborative framework and distinct roles assumed by the state, memory institutions, and NGOs in safeguarding documentary heritage in Ukraine. Finally, it outlines the conceptual foundation, technological architecture, and strategic roadmap for establishing the NDLU to ensure long-term preservation and open global access.

1. Challenges of Preservation of Cultural Heritage During Wartime

The preservation of cultural heritage, which is a reflection of humanity's collective memory and identity, has always been an essential endeavor. However, during wartime, cultural heritage faces unparalleled threats. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, revealed the deliberate destruction of libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage sites as part of an effort to erase Ukrainian identity and history.

The most visible and tragic consequences of the war have been the destruction of Ukrainian memory institutions. The Russian military has been targeting critical infrastructure, including cultural institutions. Several national libraries in Kyiv, the Korolenko State Library in Kharkiv and many libraries in different regions of Ukraine had been severely damaged by missile attacks.¹² In 2024, the Yaroslav Mudryi National Library of Ukraine conducted the 10th stage of the research on public libraries of Ukraine in the context of Russian armed aggression. According to the research, as of the end of September 2024, approximately 4,598 million items of library collections have been completely lost due to Russian armed aggression, excluding publications lost as a result of the destruction and looting of the Oleksiy Honchar Kherson Regional Universal Scientific Library.¹³

The Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine (hereinafter, MCSCU) continues to monitor the damage to cultural infrastructure caused by the Russian aggression. According to

¹¹ Shevchenko, M.; Solianyuk, A. The State of Digitization of Documentary Heritage in Scientific Libraries of Ukraine. *Knygotyra*, 2022, Vol. 79, p. 223–249, <https://doi.org/10.15388/Knygotyra.2022.79.126>.

¹² See more, *Russian Attack on Ukrainian Libraries: Monitoring Study on the Consequences of the Russian Army Shelling of Library Infrastructure from 24 February 2022 to 15 November 2023* / Translation D. Ivashkevych. The Luhansk Regional Human Rights Centre "Alternative," 2023. Retrieved from https://www.alterpravo.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Russian-attack-on-Ukrainian-libraries_eng.pdf [accessed 24/01/2026].

¹³ See more, ПБ України в умовах російської збройної агресії: результати X етапу дослідження. Блог Національна бібліотека України ім. Ярослава Мудрого, 25 November 2024. Retrieved from <https://oth.nlu.org.ua/?p=10493> [accessed 24/01/2026].

the MCSCU, 2,130 cultural infrastructure sites, including institutions under its jurisdiction and other federal agencies, apart from cultural heritage monuments have been affected. There have been 374 destructions of cultural infrastructure, which accounts for 17.6% of all such destructions. The largest proportion of affected cultural institutions comprise clubs, which represent 48.2% of all damaged cultural facilities. Overall, the affected institutions include 1,027 clubs, 759 libraries, 164 art schools, 121 museums and galleries, 39 theaters, cinemas, and concert halls, 7 nature reserves, 9 parks and zoos, and 4 circuses. The most significant losses to cultural infrastructure have occurred in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Luhansk regions.¹⁴

The attacks on Ukraine's educational institutions have not been isolated incidents but part of a deliberate campaign with devastating consequences for the future of Ukrainian nation. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has recorded widespread destruction of educational facilities at all levels, emphasizing that schools, universities, and other institutions have been deliberately or recklessly destroyed.

All these actions flagrantly violate international humanitarian law and intensify the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine caused by the ongoing aggression. A total of 3,798 educational institutions across both rural and urban areas have sustained damage. Among them, 365 institutions have been completely destroyed, depriving thousands of students of safe and functional learning environment. More than 25 university libraries have been damaged or destroyed, severely disrupting academic research and higher education. Furthermore, hundreds of kindergartens and specialized facilities for children with special needs have been affected, putting the welfare and future of Ukraine's youngest and most vulnerable at risk.¹⁵

Margarita Dykalyuk, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Ukrainian Week*, states:

*The russians have been shelling civilian homes and infrastructure. By using missile terror, they aim to erase signs of Ukraine's cultural identity. They destroy museums, memorials, university buildings, burn churches, cathedrals, and libraries, housing rare editions. They are obliterating evidence of the existence of Ukrainian culture, which is entirely distinct and independent from Russia.*¹⁶

Moreover, the situation in Ukraine's occupied territories is extremely dire. Russian forces have been looting Ukrainian cultural institutions, seizing a number of rare documents, books, and artifacts from libraries, archives, and museums, including unique manuscripts, old editions, and other cultural treasures that embody Ukraine's national heritage.¹⁷ Since this systematic looting is accompanied by physical destruction, it inflicts catastrophic and irreparable damage specifically on Ukraine's cultural heritage, threatening to erase centuries of the nation's history. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, a cynical theft of exhibits from Ukrainian museums began; some of historical and cultural sites are still under threat of destruction.¹⁸ In 2024, Russian occupiers transferred property from Kherson museums¹⁹

¹⁴ See 2130 об'єктів культурної інфраструктури зазнали пошкоджень чи руйнувань через російську агресію. Міністерство культури України, 6 December 2024. Retrieved from <https://mincult.gov.ua/news/2130-obyektiv-kulturnoyi-infrastruktury-zaznaly-poshkodzhen-chy-rujnuvan-cherez-rosijsku-agresiyu/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

¹⁵ See more, 7 Million Children of War in Ukraine. Міністерство освіти і науки України. Retrieved from <https://saveschools.in.ua/en/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

¹⁶ Дикалюк, М. Обстріляні бібліотеки, спалені музеї та викрадені картини: Росія нищить українську культуру. *Тиждень*, 13 December 2023. Retrieved from <https://tyzhden.ua/obstriliani-biblioteki-spaleni-muzei-ta-vykradeni-kartyny-rosiia-nyshchyt-ukrainsku-kulturu/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

¹⁷ See more, Горлач, П. Пограбування росіянами українських музеїв—це найбільша крадіжка предметів мистецтва з часів Другої світової війни. *Суспільне культура*, 16 January 2023. Retrieved from <https://suspilne.media/culture/359892-pograbuvanna-rosianami-ukrainskih-muzeiv-ce-najbilsa-kradizka-predmetiv-mistectva-z-casiv-drugoi-svitovoi-vijni/> [accessed 24/01/2026]; Горлач, П. Росія намагається продати викрадені з України культурні цінності на чорному ринку: генпрокурор Костін. *Суспільне культура*, 7 October 2024. Retrieved from <https://suspilne.media/culture/852369-rosia-namagaetsa-prodati-vikradeni-z-ukraini-kulturni-cinnosti-na-cornomu-rinku-genprokuror-kostin/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

¹⁸ See Гаврилов, В. Як влада РФ викрадає культурні цінності: історія та воєнні злочини. *Схід SOS*, 22 October 2024. Retrieved from <https://east-sos.org/publications/yak-vlada-rf-vykradaye-kulturni-czinnosti-istoriya-ta-voyenni-zlochyny/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

¹⁹ See Осадча, Я. Росіяни грабують колекціонерів Херсонщини і вивозять експонати у Крим—розвідка. *Ukrainska Pravda*, 18 May 2022. Retrieved from <https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2022/05/18/248685/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

and art collections from educational institutions²⁰ to occupied Crimea.²¹ Moreover, during the occupation, the russians collected Ukrainian books and burned them.²²

Ukrainian historian Volodymyr Viatrovych notes:

*The replacement of history textbooks in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine is one of the first steps taken by the new authorities ... In regions where the Russians had occupied territory for only a few months (Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kherson regions) and did not have time to prepare their own books, they began seizing and destroying Ukrainian historical literature from libraries. To carry this out, they enlisted Russian "military police" units, which, in addition to their repressive functions, also serve ideological purposes.*²³

Unfortunately, currently it is impossible to determine the exact number of exhibits stolen by the russians from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. According to UNESCO estimates, the damage done to Ukraine's cultural heritage exceeds US\$3,5 billion.²⁴

According to Ukrainian historian Yevhen Rachkov, the aggressors aim to erase Ukrainian identity and undermine Ukrainian cultural sovereignty by stripping the nation of the connections to its history.²⁵ In the post-war era, such actions are a clear violation of international laws that protect cultural heritage, further complicating the prospects for the recovery and restoration of invaluable documents.²⁶

Cultural heritage in Ukraine has been increasingly threatened by war, and a comprehensive strategy is needed to address this threat. International cooperation is essential to provide the resources and expertise needed to stabilize and protect endangered collections. UNESCO, the International Council on Archives, and many others play an important role in mobilizing awareness and support for the protection of endangered heritage.

Digital preservation provides a robust method for safeguarding cultural assets. By digitizing books, manuscripts, and archival documents, institutions can produce secure backups that ensure the continuity of essential information, even if the original materials are lost. These initiatives not only protect against potential loss but also expand access to cultural resources for a global audience.

Furthermore, prioritizing the recovery of looted cultural property is crucial in post-conflict reconstruction. This process involves meticulous documentation of stolen objects, close cooperation with international law enforcement agencies, and strong advocacy for the enforcement of cultural property protection treaties.

The war in Ukraine has highlighted on the one hand, the weakness of protecting cultural heritage, and on the other hand, its importance. Country's libraries, archives, and museums—vital repositories of collective memory—have been subjected to russian destruction and looting, jeopardizing the preservation

²⁰ See Ukraine: Russians Pillage Kherson Cultural Institutions. *Human Rights Watch*, 20 December 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/20/ukraine-russians-pillage-kherson-cultural-institutions> [accessed 24/01/2026].

²¹ See more, Salam, Y.; De Luce, D. "Just the Way the Nazis Did": Evidence Suggests Russians Are Stealing Art from Ukraine on a World War II Scale. *NBC News*, 6 April 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-stealing-art-ukraine-nazi-level-world-war2-rcna77879> [accessed 24/01/2026].

²² See Vovk, K. Russians Seize and Burn Ukrainian Books in the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine. *Svidomi*, 5 February 2023. Retrieved from <https://svidomi.in.ua/en/page/russians-seize-and-burn-ukrainian-books-in-the-temporarily-occupied-territories-of-ukraine> [accessed 24/01/2026]. See also, Russians Seize and Burn Ukrainian Books. *Ukrainska Pravda*, 6 February 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/02/06/7388039/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

²³ В'ятрович, В. Війна за майбутнє. Хто напише наш підручник з історії. *Glavcom*, 31 August 2022. Retrieved from <https://glavcom.ua/columns/vyatrovych/pidruchnik-istoriji-u-vijni-za-majbutnje-872007.html> [accessed 24/01/2026].

²⁴ See Russia Has Caused US\$3.5 Billion Worth of Damage to Ukrainian Cultural Heritage, Says UNESCO. *Ukrainska Pravda*, 14 February 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/02/14/7441824/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

²⁵ For more details, see Рачков, Є. Знищення, збереження та переосмислення міської культурної спадщини України під час російсько-української війни. *Вісник Харківського національного університету імені В. Н. Каразіна. Серія "Історія"*, 2022, No. 62, p. 12–48, <https://doi.org/10.26565/2220-7929-2022-62-01>.

²⁶ Cf. Осадча, Я. Росіяни грабують колекціонерів Херсонщини і вивозять експонати у Крим—розвідка.

of national identity. Addressing these challenges requires commitment to cultural heritage safeguarding, both during and after conflict. By prioritizing investment in preservation, documentation, and recovery, policymakers and cultural institutions help ensure the long-term preservation of human cultural legacy.

2. Current State of Documentary Heritage in Ukraine

Between July 12 and August 19, 2023, a survey was conducted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on scholarly, historical, and artistic documents considered to be an integral part of Ukraine's documentary heritage.²⁷ The study aimed to identify the essential characteristics of the aforementioned documents through careful content analysis. The results were expected to provide valuable insights into the nature and extent of Ukraine's cultural heritage, thereby contributing to the development of an informed understanding of the country's historical and artistic heritage. The survey was conducted among 46 institutions from different regions of Ukraine, all of which have rare and valuable documents in their collections. The respondent pool consisted of 18 regional universal scientific libraries, 13 national and state libraries, 6 academic libraries affiliated with higher education institutions, 4 museums, 2 municipal public libraries, 2 archives, and 1 state historical and cultural reserve.

According to the survey results, the institutions that responded collectively hold more than 20 million items of scholarly, historical, and artistic value, including manuscripts, incunabula, paleotypes, periodicals, and other types of documents (Figure 1). However, only a meagre 0.75% of those items have been digitized. Respondents reported using a variety of scanners, cameras, and multifunction devices to digitize their collections. Digital data is stored in a variety of formats, including tiff, pdf, jpg, and djvu. A significant proportion of institutions (95.3%) require specialized equipment to digitize documents. In addition, 27% of respondents indicated that they outsource document scanning. Almost all of the institutions (90.6%) employ between two and thirteen staff members in the digitization process, with the majority (30 institutions) having between two and five staff members working on the digitization of their collections. Five institutions have between six and ten staff members working on digitization, and three institutions have more than ten staff members working on digitization. Finally, 35 respondents expressed a need for digitization training and workshops.

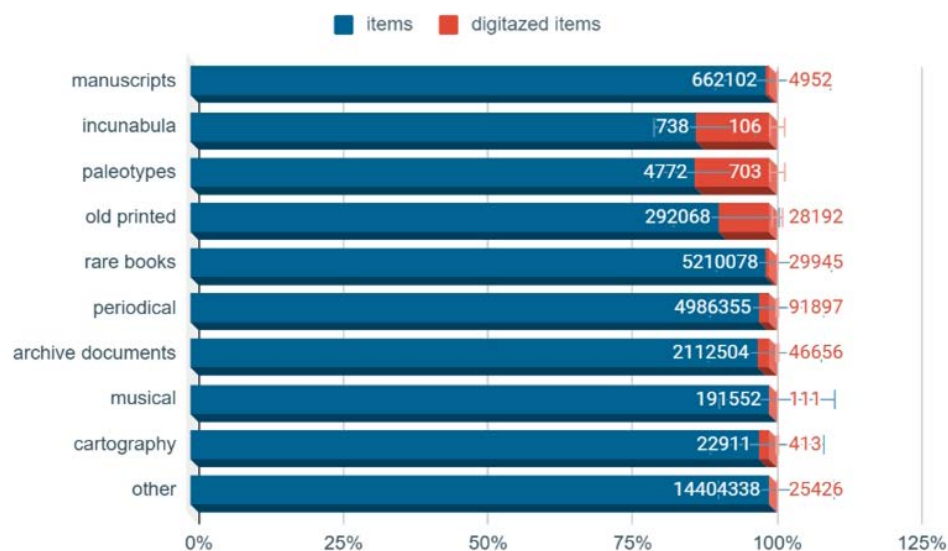


Figure 1. Cultural and scholarly heritage in Ukrainian libraries.

²⁷ See Бруй, О. Документальна спадщина України: опитування в межах проекту зі створення Національної електронної бібліотеки України. *Українська бібліотечна асоціація*, 2 October 2023. Retrieved from <https://ula.org.ua/novyny-ta-podii/novyny/5144-dokumentalna-spadshchyna-ukrainy-opytuvannia-v-mezhakh-proiektu-zi-stvorennia-natsionalnoi-elektronnoi-biblioteki-ukrainy> [accessed 24/01/2026].

The results of the survey indicate a need for additional equipment and software to ensure high-quality encoding, as well as proper preservation and accessibility of digitized material. Equipment required includes scanners of various formats, computers, monitors and cameras, as well as image processing and text recognition software, servers and network storage, hard drives, and uninterruptible power supplies.

It is imperative to ensure that the digitization of these valuable documents is carried out with the utmost care and precision, as any errors or inconsistencies can result in the loss of valuable information; therefore, it is crucial to use the equipment and software mentioned above.

3. Role of the State, Memory Institutions, and NGOs

Safeguarding Ukraine's cultural heritage during the war requires coordinated efforts of three key actors: the state, memory institutions, and NGOs.

The state is the primary custodian of cultural heritage, and during wartime, its role becomes even more critical in protecting the nation's cultural identity. Key initiatives include maintaining the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine and the State Register of Scientific Objects, both integral to preserving Ukraine's national heritage.

The creation of State Register of Book Heritage is a significant step in Ukraine's cultural preservation strategy, with plans to integrate it into the NDLU. The State Register of Scientific Objects, which includes institutions essential for the preservation of Ukraine's documentary heritage, is also of particular importance. This register features notable libraries such as the Vernadsky National Library, the Vasyl Stefanyk Lviv National Scientific Library, the National Scientific Agricultural Library, and the State Scientific and Pedagogical Library, as well as the academic libraries of national universities located in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Lviv, and Chernivtsi. These institutions play a critical role in safeguarding and promoting access to Ukraine's rich documentary resources.

Memory institutions, including libraries, archives, and museums, are the cornerstone of cultural preservation and play a key role in safeguarding Ukraine's documentary heritage. These institutions house vast collections of invaluable materials, including manuscripts, incunabula, periodicals, rare books, and archival records, which collectively embody the nation's history, culture, and identity. Despite limited resources and the challenges of war, all those institutions preserve invaluable documentary heritage, work to expand digitization efforts, ensure that cultural material remains accessible and resilient, and continue to demonstrate resilience and innovation in their efforts. They are actively engaged in cataloging and digitizing their collections to create backups that can withstand potential threats. Such digital initiatives protect the materials and ensure that they are accessible to a global audience, promoting Ukraine's cultural heritage beyond its borders.

Despite many obstacles, memory institutions in Ukraine have been embracing collaboration and innovation. They are partnering with local and international organizations to secure funding, acquire equipment, and share expertise. These partnerships enable them to preserve cultural materials that are at risk of destruction, while also enhancing public access to their collections. Moreover, memory institutions play an educational role by fostering public engagement and awareness. They organize exhibitions, digital showcases, and workshops to connect people with their cultural heritage, emphasizing its significance during the war.

Ukraine's memory institutions remain steadfast in their commitment to preserve and share the nation's cultural heritage. Their tireless efforts, even under the most challenging circumstances, underscore their indispensable role in safeguarding not only the past but also the future of Ukraine's cultural identity.

Ukrainian NGOs contribute greatly to the multifaceted efforts to protect nation's cultural heritage. In many cases, they fill in the critical gaps left by state institutions and memory organizations by providing flexibility, innovation, and grassroots engagement.

One of the primary roles of NGOs is advocacy. They raise awareness about the threats facing Ukraine's cultural heritage, both domestically and internationally, and ensure that the issue remains a priority on global agendas. Through campaigns, media engagement, and collaboration with international bodies such as UNESCO²⁸ and Blue Shield International,²⁹ NGOs reinforce the urgency of protecting cultural property at risk of destruction, theft, or neglect. NGOs also play an important role in mobilizing resources. They secure funding from international donors, philanthropic organizations, and private individuals and channel these resources into digitization projects, restoration efforts, and safe relocation of endangered artifacts. This financial support is often critical for memory institutions that may lack the resources to implement large-scale preservation initiatives independently.

In addition, NGOs act as connectors and facilitators, fostering collaboration between the state, memory institutions, and international partners. They help coordinate efforts, share expertise, and build networks that enable the exchange of knowledge and best practices. For example, in 2023, Ukrainian NGOs partnered with the MCSCU and memory institutions to establish a working group for the creation of the NDLU, bringing together diverse stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive and unified approach to digitization.

NGOs are also heavily involved in education and capacity building. They organize training programs for librarians, archivists, and museum professionals to enhance their skills in areas such as digital preservation, documentation, and disaster response. These initiatives empower memory institutions to better safeguard their collections and respond effectively to the challenges posed by the conflict.

NGOs often act as first responders in emergencies. When cultural sites are damaged or threatened, they can quickly mobilize teams and resources to assess the damage, stabilize artifacts, and implement recovery strategies. Their agility and on-the-ground presence make them invaluable in addressing immediate threats to cultural heritage.

Finally, NGOs play a crucial role in engaging the public. By organizing exhibitions, educational campaigns, and cultural events, they foster a sense of collective responsibility for preserving national heritage. This grassroots involvement not only strengthens national identity but also builds international solidarity around the importance of cultural preservation. They are a vital force in the effort to protect and preserve Ukraine's cultural heritage. Their ability to advocate, mobilize resources, build capacity, and engage communities makes them indispensable partners in ensuring that Ukraine's rich cultural heritage endures for future generations.

The collaboration among Ukrainian government agencies, cultural memory institutions, and NGOs plays a significant role in the preservation of cultural heritage within the NDLU. By pooling their resources and expertise, these entities form a comprehensive network dedicated to protecting Ukraine's unique cultural identity. Such partnership not only promotes preservation by archiving historical documents but also ensures that invaluable cultural assets will be available in the future. Through their joint efforts, they can maintain Ukraine's rich heritage and promote awareness of its diverse heritage on a global scale.

4. Challenges and Opportunities in Building the NDLU

According to the UNESCO Recommendations,³⁰ the state policy regarding documentary heritage should be focused not only on its preservation but also on providing free and easy access to it for

²⁸ Rebuilding the Foundations of Peace in Ukraine. UNESCO. Access <https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war> [accessed 24/01/2026].

²⁹ Blue Shield Ukraine. Facebook Page, 24 January 2025. Access <https://www.facebook.com/bsi.in.ua/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

³⁰ Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form. UNESCO, 17 November 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-preservation-and-access-documentary-heritage-including-digital-form> [accessed 24/01/2026].

everyone. One of the ways to achieve this goal is by creating digital libraries which are widely used in global practice today.

Digital libraries have been created in most EU countries. Such libraries exist not only at the institutional level but also at the national level providing open access to documentary heritage housed in different institutions from a single site. Notable examples of national digital libraries in this context include those of Germany,³¹ the United Kingdom,³² France,³³ Poland,³⁴ Latvia,³⁵ Estonia,³⁶ and others.

The concept and development of the NDLU are based on various legislative and strategic documents, alongside the mandates for preserving cultural heritage. Ukrainian law requires the creation of backup copies of valuable and rare documents and collections, reflecting a commitment to safeguarding national treasures. The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine supported these efforts with resolution No. 1716 “On Approval of the Program of Preservation of Libraries and Archival Funds for 2000–2005,” and resolution No. 956 “On Approval of the State Target National-Cultural Program for the Creation of the Library System ‘Library-XXI,’” passed on September 15, 1999. Additionally, the government program “Library-XXI” (2009), the draft law “On Libraries and Library Matters” (2020), the Strategy of Library Development for the Period up to 2025 (2016), the Strategy for the Development of Reading for 2021–2025 (2022), and the Ukraine Recovery Plan (2022) emphasized the importance of digital transformation and preservation. However, despite these initiatives and legislative requirements, none of the programs have been fully implemented due to insufficient funding allocated as specified in their provisions.

In 2023, the Ukrainian Library Association launched the NDLU project in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine (hereinafter, MCIPU) and UNESCO to preserve at-risk documentary heritage.³⁷ The Association and the MCIPU signed a Memorandum of Cooperation on March 27, 2023. In it, the parties agreed to consolidate their efforts to digitize, preserve, and make available Ukraine’s documentary heritage in a long-term accessible form, which is under threat as a result of Russian armed aggression against Ukraine.³⁸

Subsequently, a group of Ukrainian library specialists made several research trips to Europe between March and June 2023. The purpose of those trips was to gather information and get acquainted with the practical expertise of leading digital projects in Europe. The project greatly benefited from international

³¹ See above all, Altenhöner, R. The German National Library and Digital Preservation: Challenges and Opportunities. *World Digital Libraries: An International Journal*, 2010, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.3233/WDL-120050>.

³² See above all, Pennock, M.; Day, M. Managing and Preserving Digital Collections at the British Library. In: *Managing Digital Cultural Objects: Analysis, Discovery and Retrieval* / Eds. A. Foster, P. Rafferty. London: Facet Publishing, 2016, p. 111–128, <https://doi.org/10.29085/9781783301539.006>.

³³ See above all, Duchesneau, M. Gallica: The Online Digital Library of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 2014, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 337–347, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409814000287>.

³⁴ See above all, Mazurek, C.; Werla, M. Network of Digital Libraries in Poland as a Model for National and International Cooperation. In: *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*, 2011, p. [1–13]. Retrieved from <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2011/papers/13> [accessed 24/01/2026].

³⁵ See above all, Vilks, A. The National Library of Latvia, 2001–2008. *Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues*, 2009, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 19–31, <https://doi.org/10.7227/ALX.21.2.3>.

³⁶ See above all, Maaslieb, H.; Jantson, S. The Digitization and Digital Collections in Research and Archival Libraries in Estonia. In: *Proceedings: INFORUM 2006: 12th Annual Conference on Professional Information Resources, Prague 23–25 May 2006*. Praha: Albertina i come Praha, 2006, p. 1–4. Retrieved from https://www.inforum.cz/pdf/2006/Maaslieb_Helle.pdf [accessed 24/01/2026].

³⁷ See more, Реалізація проєкту створення Національної електронної бібліотеки України. Міністерство культури України, 15 August 2024. Retrieved from <https://mincult.gov.ua/news/realizacziya-proyektu-stvorenniya-nacziionalnoyi-elektronnoyi-biblioteki-ukrayiny/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

³⁸ See Меморандум про співпрацю між Міністерством культури та інформаційної політики України та Громадською організацією “Всеукраїнська громадська організація Українська бібліотечна асоціація,” 27 Березень 2023, [p. 1–3]. *Українська бібліотечна асоціація*, 27 March 2023. Retrieved from <https://ula.org.ua/pro-nas/dokumenty/uhody-pro-spiivpratsiu> [accessed 24/01/2026].

cooperation, with experts from Poland,³⁹ Germany,⁴⁰ Estonia,⁴¹ France, Latvia,⁴² and Great Britain providing valuable insights. Such research endeavors have been crucial for understanding best practices and integrating them into the NDLU framework.

Throughout 2023, the NDLU working group worked on developing the project's documents. The documents on the NDLU's concept, statement, regulation, technical requirements, roadmap, and budget were presented on January 31, 2024.⁴³

The essence of the project was to create a centralized information system (Figure 2) and an open platform, developed and operating on the principle of equal participation of all stakeholders, to preserve the documentary heritage of Ukraine, and ensure open access to it.

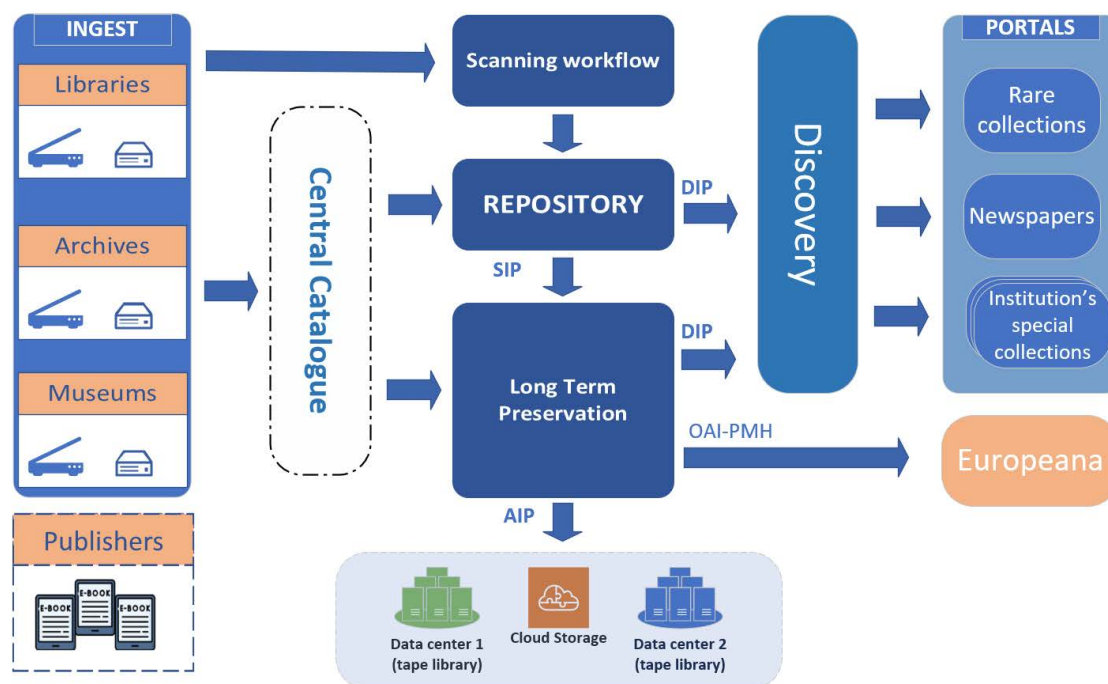


Figure 2. Graphical model of system components.

Besides these main objectives, the project also aims to:

- establish regulatory documents for the NDLU;
- develop technical and organizational infrastructure for its operation and growth;
- standardize digitization, preservation, metadata creation, and access;
- ensure long-term preservation of digitized documentary heritage;
- digitize and provide access to Ukraine's documentary heritage;

³⁹ See Досвід Польщі для створення Національної електронної бібліотеки України. *Українська бібліотечна асоціація*, 14 April 2023. Retrieved from <https://ula.org.ua/novyny-ta-podii/novyny/5094-dosvid-polshchi-dlia-stvorennia-natsionalnoi-elektronnoi-biblioteki-ukrainy> [accessed 24/01/2026].

⁴⁰ See Досвід Німеччини для створення Національної електронної бібліотеки України. *Українська бібліотечна асоціація*, 29 June 2023. Retrieved from <https://ula.org.ua/novyny-ta-podii/novyny/5111-dosvid-nimechchyny-dlia-stvorennia-natsionalnoi-elektronnoi-biblioteki-ukrainy> [accessed 24/01/2026].

⁴¹ See Досвід Естонії на допомогу у створенні Національної електронної бібліотеки України. *Українська бібліотечна асоціація*, 14 April 2023. Retrieved from <https://ula.org.ua/novyny-ta-podii/novyny/5093-dosvid-estonii-na-dopomohu-u-stvorenni-natsionalnoi-elektronnoi-biblioteki-ukrainy> [accessed 24/01/2026].

⁴² See Досвід Латвії для створення Національної електронної бібліотеки України. *Українська бібліотечна асоціація*, 18 May 2023. Retrieved from <https://ula.org.ua/novyny-ta-podii/novyny/5106-dosvid-latvii-dlia-stvorennia-natsionalnoi-elektronnoi-biblioteki-ukrainy> [accessed 24/01/2026].

⁴³ У МКІП презентували концепцію проекту Національної електронної бібліотеки. *Укрінформ*, 2 February 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-culture/3821066-u-mkip-prezentovali-konceptiu-proektu-nacionalnoi-elektronnoi-biblioteki.html> [accessed 24/01/2026].

- create a State Register of Book Monuments of Ukraine;
- populate the library with digitized materials and metadata;
- develop a user-friendly portal for unified search and access;
- set up training centers to enhance digitization and digital library expertise;
- integrate the library into the global information space, including Europeana.

As a result of significant progress and key achievements, the NDLU has played an important role in safeguarding the cultural and documentary heritage of Ukraine. The project focused on the digitization of manuscripts, old prints, and books and periodicals published in Ukrainian (1801–1922) and other languages (1801–1860) by 20 centers at participating institutions with additional outsourcing to achieve the project's goals. One million documents will be digitized by 2029, ensuring their long-term preservation and accessibility.

Furthermore, as outlined in the regulatory documents, the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communication acted as both *the Holder* and *the Technical Administrator*. The Yaroslav Mudryi National Library of Ukraine acted as *the Administrator*, while *the Creator* (a memory institution) managed the repository by supplying the digital copies of documents and their metadata. As a result of these actions, a solid foundation will be established for the comprehensive digitization and preservation of the Ukraine's historical records.

Additionally, a dedicated project website⁴⁴ has been developed to serve as a centralized platform for disseminating information about the NDLU initiative. The website provided detailed updates on the project's progress, shared relevant resources, and fostered transparency in its implementation. In addition, the platform facilitated communication and collaboration among stakeholders, ensuring broad engagement from both national and international partners.

To address the skills and knowledge gaps in digitization and preservation, the NDLU project has implemented training programs targeted at librarians and other professionals involved in digital preservation. The programs focused on the international standards for digitization and metadata creation, efficient use of digitization technologies and software solutions, and the best practices for ensuring the longevity and accessibility of digital collections. A comprehensive regulatory framework has been developed for the implementation of the NDLU, incorporating architectural design principles that prioritize a centralized, modular, and scalable system, the integration of the State Register of Book Heritage as a core component, and strict adherence to international conventions on cultural heritage preservation. It is estimated that the project will cost \$73 million by 2029, according to the detailed budget proposal that has also been developed. The project proposal had been submitted to UNESCO and the MCIPU for reviewing, aligning it with both national and international cultural preservation priorities.

In summary, the NDLU project has faced multiple major obstacles. Many valuable documents had been at risk due to war, aging materials, poor storage conditions, and lack of preservation measures, which hindered efforts to safeguard them for future generations. Frequent changes in decision-making further complicated the situation, leading to disruptions in policy continuity and inconsistency in support for the initiative. Moreover, lack of dedicated funding in the state budget posed a significant challenge, limiting the resources available for digitization and preservation activities. On top of this, the project relied heavily on the competence of librarians and other professionals involved in the digitization process. Their technical and archival skills were crucial for the implementation of the project. Still, the shortage of specialized training and expertise in this field challenged the project's overall success. Without addressing it, the goal of creating the NDLU would not be fully realized.

⁴⁴ Проект створення Національної електронної бібліотеки України: збереження документальної спадщини / Project for Development of the National Digital Library of Ukraine: Safeguarding Documentary Heritage at Risk. Українська бібліотечна асоціація. Access <https://ndlu.ua.org.ua/> [accessed 24/01/2026].

Conclusions

The article examines how Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine has shown the profound vulnerability of nation's cultural heritage during wartime. It demonstrates how deliberate attacks, systemic destruction, and looting of libraries, archives, and educational institutions directly assault nation's collective memory, history, and sovereignty. Keeping in mind the mounting physical threats, empirical evidence from nationwide surveys has highlighted a critical infrastructure deficit. This deficit manifests in several ways, including underfunding, a shortage of specialized equipment, such as high-resolution scanners and secure servers, a scarcity of trained digital preservation specialists, and physical vulnerabilities in facilities that lack the resources to withstand wartime conditions. While over 20 million rare and valuable documents are preserved in Ukrainian institutions, only 0.75% have been digitized, highlighting a pressing technological gap that threatens the long-term preservation of Ukraine's cultural heritage.

The authors of the article argue that in order to realize comprehensive safeguarding of the most valuable documentary heritage in Ukraine, the unprecedented challenges require a synchronized, multi-stakeholder framework in which the state maintains vital legal registries and strategic leadership, with frontline memory institutions actively preserving and curating collections, and NGOs driving agile emergency responses, advocacy, and international solidarity.

In the future, a comprehensive and methodical effort to integrate the NDLU will consolidate Ukraine's institutional, governmental, and civic efforts into a unified digital infrastructure. Moreover, this collaboration will foster a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for Ukraine's cultural heritage, thereby enhancing community engagement and support for the initiative. It will also facilitate knowledge exchange, enabling the incorporation of best practices from international partners, which is vital for the successful implementation of digital preservation efforts. Supported by international cooperation, standardized metadata schemas, and secure distributed archiving, Ukraine's endangered documentary heritage will be permanently safeguarded and integrated into the global information space for future generations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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