



Cultural Heritage Preparedness and EU Civilian Crisis Management Missions

EU's civilian crisis management missions are not cultural heritage agencies. Their added value lies in **supporting national and local authorities** when cultural heritage becomes part of the wider security, rule-of-law, preparedness, resilience, and conflict picture.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) 2025 progress report shows that several civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions are already engaged in this field. Their activities include **legal reform, monitoring, capacity-building, addressing heritage crimes, supporting local authorities, and integrating cultural heritage protection into conflict prevention and security efforts**. All of this is mandate-based and in support of local authorities.

From a preparedness perspective, their role is also to help connect the dots: linking national authorities, local actors, EU Delegations, Commission-funded programmes, Member State expertise, and international partners, so that cultural heritage protection becomes part of wider institutional and societal resilience rather than an isolated cultural concern. This includes both tangible heritage — such as sites, buildings, monuments and collections — and intangible heritage, including memory, traditions, knowledge, practices and forms of cultural expression. **Civilian CSDP missions can support the protection of intangible cultural heritage by helping partner-country institutions strengthen resilience against hybrid, cyber, and FIMI threats that target memory, identity, cultural expression, and social cohesion.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Cultural heritage is part of security, identity, inclusion and resilience

In conflict and crisis settings, cultural heritage is rarely only a cultural issue. It can be deliberately targeted, looted or trafficked. It can be instrumentalised through identity politics, divisive narratives, and selective versions of history. At the same time, both tangible and intangible cultural heritage can be a source of identity, continuity, and social cohesion for communities under pressure. Cultural heritage also has an economic and sustainable-development dimension: traditional crafts, restoration work and responsibly managed cultural tourism can support livelihoods, recovery and national resilience, especially in countries emerging from crisis.

This makes cultural heritage relevant to security, rule of law, organised crime, accountability, information integrity, and societal resilience.



A preparedness approach should also be gender-sensitive: it should recognise the roles of women and men as creators, preservers, and transmitters of cultural heritage, and avoid reproducing narrow or one-sided accounts of whose memory and contribution are protected.

Preparedness means institutional capacity and coordination

Preparedness is not only about emergency plans for individual sites, buildings, or collections. It is also about whether institutions can anticipate, prevent, absorb, and respond to threats affecting cultural heritage.

Civilian CSDP missions can support this by strengthening relevant civilian security capacities, improving situational awareness, supporting coordination among authorities, and linking cultural heritage protection to broader resilience and the EU's internal-external security nexus. This preparedness should cover both physical protection and the safeguarding of memory, identity, knowledge, and social cohesion.

Missions contribute through mandates, local presence and the wider EU toolbox

Civilian CSDP missions contribute through their operational mandates and local presence. They may support police, border management, rule-of-law institutions, monitoring, crisis management structures, local coordination and advisory work.

Their role is not to replace cultural experts, UNESCO, museums, or national heritage authorities. It is to help create conditions in which national authorities can protect cultural heritage more effectively. Where missions are short-staffed or lack specialised expertise, they can also help connect local partners with EU Delegations, Commission-funded programmes, Member State expertise, visiting experts, and international partners.

EXAMPLES FROM CIVILIAN CSDP MISSIONS



IRAQ – TRAFFICKING, LEGAL REFORM AND COORDINATION

The EU Advisory Mission in Iraq is one of the clearest examples. The mission supports Iraqi government and local authorities in protecting cultural heritage, including through legal advice, support to cultural heritage legislation, awareness raising, inter-agency coordination, capacity-building and efforts to prevent illicit trafficking of cultural property.

The report highlights work on a national strategy for cultural heritage protection, coordination between institutions, a pilot national cultural heritage protection database, cooperation with INTERPOL, and exchanges



with European law-enforcement expertise. This shows how a mission can act not only as an advisor, but also as a connector between national authorities, international partners, and specialised expertise.

UKRAINE – PREPAREDNESS, ACCOUNTABILITY AND CULTURAL WARFARE

Ukraine is currently the most prominent example of why cultural heritage protection must also be understood as a preparedness, security, and resilience issue.

The report describes Russia’s war in terms of “cultural warfare”, including destruction of heritage, occupation and access constraints, looting and illicit trade, erosion of identity, cultural erasure and divisive narratives. It states that Russia has questioned and denied Ukrainian identity and history, while destroying or severely damaging cultural heritage landmarks such as monuments, museums, art collections, libraries, and archives.

The EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine’s operational planning identifies cultural heritage as a priority area within its support to the investigation and prosecution of international crimes. This links cultural heritage protection to preparedness in very practical terms: documenting damage, supporting investigations, strengthening cooperation between law enforcement, prosecutors, border authorities and the cultural sector, protecting national identity, and preparing for recovery. The report also notes cooperation with international organisations, think tanks, academia, and a visiting expert from the Netherlands Police.



LIBYA – BORDER MANAGEMENT AND ILLICIT TRAFFICKING

The EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya shows the border management and organised crime dimension. Cultural heritage is included in the mission’s operational planning, especially in relation to countering trafficking of cultural property.

The mission has supported Libyan authorities through training on combating illicit trafficking of cultural heritage, including work with customs officers to strengthen border checks and protect Libya’s cultural patrimony. The report also points to cooperation with EU Delegation programmes and plans to expand cooperation with INTERPOL and other international partners.

KOSOVO – RULE OF LAW, CONTESTED HERITAGE AND CONFLICT PREVENTION

The EU Rule of Law mission in Kosovo illustrates how cultural heritage can intersect with rule of law, post-conflict stabilisation, and sensitive community relations.



Its activities include monitoring cultural heritage protection cases and legal reforms, outreach to religious and cultural institutions, patrolling heritage sites, analysing cultural appropriation trends, and supporting cooperation between communities in areas with contested cultural heritage. This is also where cultural heritage protection can have a confidence-building effect, if it helps communities manage sensitive questions of access, ownership, and protection through legal and institutional channels.



GEORGIA – MONITORING, ACCESS, SATELLITE IMAGERY AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia shows the monitoring and prevention role of civilian CSDP missions. Cultural heritage protection and monitoring are embedded in the mission’s strategic framework and operational documents.

Because access to breakaway regions is constrained, the mission relies on open-source intelligence, satellite imagery, and cooperation with Georgian authorities. The report also notes that EUMM Georgia supports heritage-related initiatives through its Confidence Building Facility. This links cultural heritage protection to situational awareness, access, confidence-building, and evidence-informed decision-making.

ARMENIA – IDENTITY, CONTESTED NARRATIVES AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

The EU Mission in Armenia illustrates how cultural heritage can become highly sensitive when linked to identity, territory, historical narratives, and claims of ownership.

The report describes cultural heritage as a highly sensitive and extremely politicised issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The mission monitors cultural heritage issues during patrols and collects information in a dedicated database.



The broader lesson is that cultural heritage does not in itself cause conflict, but contested heritage, symbols, and selective historical narratives can be instrumentalised where questions of territory, identity, and legitimacy are already disputed.

Photo Credit: EUAM Iraq, EUMM Georgia, EUAM Ukraine



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WHAT CAN CIVILIAN CSDP MISSIONS DO?

Civilian CSDP missions can contribute by:

- 1.** Strengthening police, border and rule-of-law capacities relevant to preventing and investigating illicit trafficking of cultural goods and other heritage-related crimes;
- 2.** Supporting host-country institutions so that cultural heritage protection is linked to wider crisis management, public security, legal frameworks, and national ownership;
- 3.** Contributing to monitoring, reporting, and situational awareness, including through open-source information and satellite imagery where appropriate;
- 4.** Helping connect national authorities, local actors, heritage experts, law-enforcement bodies, EU Delegations, Commission-funded programmes, Member State expertise, and international partners;
- 5.** Supporting confidence-building where cultural heritage protection can help communities manage sensitive issues of identity, access, ownership, and memory;
- 6.** Supporting inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches, including by recognising the roles of women and men as creators, preservers, and transmitters of cultural heritage;
- 7.** Ensuring that cultural heritage concerns are considered in mission planning, training and conflict-sensitive approaches, where relevant to the mandate, and supporting partner-country resilience against hybrid, cyber, and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) threats that may target intangible cultural heritage, identity, memory, and social cohesion.

The practical contribution of civilian CSDP missions is to support preparedness: by strengthening situational awareness, enabling coordination, connecting local needs with the wider EU toolbox, and helping national authorities protect cultural heritage as part of societal resilience and sustainable peace.



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