

## EVALUATION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT CAPABILITIES IN SAFEGUARDING CULTURAL PROPERTY DURING ARMED CONFLICTS

EVALUACIÓN DE LA CAPACIDAD DE LAS FUERZAS DEL ORDEN PARA SALVAGUARDAR LOS BIENES CULTURALES DURANTE LOS CONFLICTOS ARMADOS

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**Abstract:** The problem of protecting cultural heritage in hostilities is highly relevant, as demonstrated by the example of the Karabakh conflict. The primary purpose of the proposed work is to assess the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies' use of international and national legal norms and mechanisms for documentation, and to identify the main difficulties encountered along this path. The realization of the proposed goal involves using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method, which makes it possible to analyze scientific sources and literature on the proposed issues. Likewise, the scientific methods of content analysis and comparison enable the processing of the collected sources and the highlighting of the most critical findings of other scholars. The results indicate that the conflict in Karabakh has undoubtedly threatened the local cultural environment. In the same way, the findings of this study contribute to the literature by providing a comprehensive assessment of the capacity of law enforcement agencies to protect cultural property. In that sense, the information obtained may serve as the basis for forming specific legal claims for compensation for the damage caused. This study addresses the existing gaps by defining the legal mechanisms for regulating the protection of cultural heritage and identifying the primary challenges in preserving it. Therefore, it was found that the limited resources available for conducting investigative actions lead to a lack of opportunities for

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organizing the restitution of cultural values. Finally, the conclusions note that an important aspect is that the history of Karabakh is overly politicised, which also does not contribute to the preservation of the region's cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, Evidence, Karabakh, Politicisation, Satellite images.

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**Resumen:** *El problema de la protección del patrimonio cultural en el contexto de las hostilidades es de gran relevancia, como lo demuestra el ejemplo del conflicto en Karabaj. El principal objetivo del presente estudio es evaluar la eficacia del uso por parte de las agencias encargadas de hacer cumplir la ley de las normas jurídicas internacionales y nacionales, así como de los mecanismos de documentación, e identificar las principales dificultades en este ámbito. La consecución de este objetivo implica el uso del enfoque científico PRISMA, que permite recopilar fuentes científicas y literatura sobre la temática propuesta. Igualmente, los métodos científicos de análisis de contenido y comparación posibilitan el procesamiento de las fuentes recopiladas y la identificación de los hallazgos más relevantes de otros investigadores. Los resultados indican que el conflicto en Karabaj ha supuesto, sin duda, una amenaza para el entorno cultural local. De la misma manera, los hallazgos de este estudio contribuyen a la literatura existente al proporcionar una evaluación integral de la capacidad de las agencias encargadas de hacer cumplir la ley para proteger los bienes culturales. En ese sentido, la información obtenida podría servir como base para la formulación de demandas legales específicas de compensación por los daños causados. Este estudio llena vacíos existentes al definir los mecanismos jurídicos para la regulación de la protección del patrimonio cultural e identificar los principales problemas en su preservación. Por ende, se determina que la limitación de recursos disponibles para la realización de acciones investigativas conlleva una falta de oportunidades para la organización de la restitución de bienes culturales. Finalmente, las conclusiones destacan que un aspecto fundamental es la excesiva politización de la historia de Karabaj, lo que tampoco favorece la preservación del patrimonio cultural de la región.*

**Palabras clave:** *Patrimonio cultural, Pruebas, Karabaj, Politización, Imágenes satelitales.*

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**Summary.** *I. Introduction. II. Theoretical framework. II.1. International experience. II.2. Major offences against cultural heritage and law enforcement. III. Methodology. III.1. Research design. III.2. Materials. III.3. Data analysis. IV. Results and discussion. V. Conclusions. References.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Ensuring the protection of cultural heritage is one of the most complex and vital issues in contemporary international law and humanitarian action, especially under the difficult conditions of armed conflicts. The destruction of cultural sites results in the loss of historical memory, an essential element of national identity, and threatens global efforts to safeguard cultural heritage. According to modern research, the effectiveness of national law enforcement agencies in protecting cultural property during wars or other armed conflicts depends on legal, procedural, and technical factors (Blake, 2011).

In the context of the Karabakh conflict, which has continued for more than three decades, the protection of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage is a particularly relevant issue. During this conflict, numerous cultural sites were destroyed or severely damaged, creating significant challenges for the country's law enforcement agencies (Dunkley, 2021). Scholars have highlighted challenges such as the restoration of cultural sites and the prosecution of perpetrators (Vigneron, 2016). However, despite the existence of specific legal mechanisms and the difficulties in applying them, this study differs from earlier works. It does not aim solely to clarify the general problems of the legal system in protecting cultural heritage but also to describe concrete situations from the Karabakh conflict. Moreover, unlike previous studies, it focuses on the human

rights protection function during active military operations, particularly detailing the role of law enforcement agencies in safeguarding cultural objects in armed conflicts. This approach emphasizes the practical dimension of cultural heritage security, while earlier research was mainly theoretical.

Other factors further determine the relevance of this study. After the active phase of the Karabakh conflict, the problem of protecting Azerbaijan's cultural heritage has become even more critical, as the destruction, damage, and misappropriation of internationally recognised cultural sites represent a serious threat. Examining the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies makes it possible to assess the scale of the damage and identify weaknesses in the existing protection mechanisms.

The main objective of this research is to analyse the role of Azerbaijan's and Armenia's law enforcement agencies in protecting cultural heritage during and after the Karabakh conflict. Several issues remain unexplored and have not been the subject of specific studies, and a comprehensive analysis has been lacking. Therefore, it is essential to examine the application of international and national law in the armed conflict context, identify limitations in documenting the large-scale destruction of cultural sites, and assess the challenges in investigating and prosecuting those responsible.

The focus of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of applying international and national legal norms, as well as the mechanisms used by law enforcement agencies for documentation, and to identify the main difficulties encountered in this process. Specifically, the following issues are analysed:

1. What are the primary legal mechanisms for protecting cultural heritage applied by Azerbaijan and Armenia during the Karabakh conflict, and how were they used in practice?
2. What measures were taken by law enforcement agencies to document the destruction of cultural sites?
3. What were the main difficulties in investigating crimes against cultural heritage?

Thus, this study identifies shortcomings in existing approaches to preserving and protecting cultural heritage during armed conflicts, and offers specific recommendations for improving law enforcement.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This review aims to identify the primary theories and concepts related to the law enforcement of cultural heritage in the context of wars and conflicts. This review aims to analyze international experience in this area and identify the main crimes against cultural heritage.

### **II.1. International experience**

Many countries are facing a significant issue, not only of redistributing cultural heritage but also of preserving the physical integrity of existing cultural property. Therefore, many scholars have raised this problem. In particular, several studies have demonstrated that the occupied, annexed, or temporarily occupied territories of many countries, including those of the former Soviet Union, currently face the crucial task of preserving and protecting their cultural

heritage (Malysh et al., 2020; Vrdoljak, 2023; Vasina et al., 2024). The works demonstrate the importance of studying international experiences in this area and forming new knowledge based on current needs.

However, the authors did not examine individual cases in detail; instead, they addressed the general realities of post-Soviet countries. This generalized approach reflects a broader gap in the literature. Some scholars emphasize the need for strategies adapted to local contexts, political dynamics, and identity-based tensions (Stone, 2013; Omid, 2022), while others argue for universal legal frameworks applicable across post-conflict zones (Chechi & Romani, 2023; Vrdoljak, 2023). The Karabakh case illustrates how one-size-fits-all narratives on disputed heritage ownership complicate legal strategies. This divergence underscores the importance of considering both formal conventions and the sociopolitical contexts in which they operate.

Therefore, when identifying international experience, it is useful to consider the initiatives of international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Interpol, and the International Criminal Court (ICC), which influence the monitoring of cultural heritage protection and the investigation of war crimes. Regarding this, studies have shown that analysing the primary mechanisms for safeguarding cultural heritage in armed conflicts demonstrates the importance of integrating international legal norms into national strategies (Chechi & Romani, 2023; Qasim Derhem Dammag et al., 2024). Many scholars have examined the 1999 Protocol to the Hague Convention, which expanded states' legal obligations to preserve cultural heritage (Fincham, 2017). Likewise, Banasik (2019) outlined the key features of regulating cultural property and implementing appropriate legal protection in criminal law during armed conflict, concluding with a critical

analysis of international law and an assessment of the current state of modern criminal law regarding cultural property protection.

Nevertheless, researchers have also noted that the practical effectiveness of these norms is limited due to difficulties in their implementation at the national level. In particular, they identified gaps in law enforcement, the absence of effective monitoring by international organizations, and inadequate communication between rival states (Banasik, 2019; Yemelianova, 2023). These shortcomings contribute to the deliberate destruction of cultural property as part of hybrid warfare strategies, as seen in the Karabakh conflict. This situation highlights the need for further research and the development of key recommendations to strengthen law enforcement and legal systems for protecting cultural property during conflicts.

In conclusion, although there is general agreement on the importance of international instruments, there is considerable debate over their practical efficacy. In that sense, the Karabakh conflict provides an opportunity to examine how political narratives, enforcement challenges, and communication strategies interact with legal frameworks. These divergent academic perspectives highlight the need for case-specific, interdisciplinary, and empirically supported evaluations of cultural heritage protection.

## **II.2. Major offences against cultural heritage and law enforcement**

The scientific literature defines crimes against cultural heritage as targeted acts that result in the destruction, damage, theft or illicit transfer of cultural property. According to Chechi & Romani (2023), the process of destruction or “damage to cultural heritage during armed conflict is nothing

new” (p. 461). The authors pointed out that attacking buildings, monuments, and artefacts has existed since the beginning of the conflict. Under international law, such actions constitute serious violations that can be defined as war crimes, crimes against humanity, or crimes at the national or international level (Chechi & Romani, 2023). However, defining such crimes in the legal field is very difficult.

This situation also affected the identification of crimes during the Karabakh conflict. While most people agree on what a cultural crime is, there is disagreement in the literature about how these offenses should be categorized and dealt with. Some scholars, for instance, support ICC-led methods (Chechi & Vrdoljak, 2022), while others doubt their viability in politically delicate situations like Karabakh, where neither party has faith in outside judicial systems (Yemelianova, 2023; Van Heese, 2018).

The law enforcement process involves documenting, investigating, and prosecuting those responsible for crimes against cultural heritage. The scientific literature identifies several such crimes, including the reduction, destruction, and misappropriation of cultural property. These acts may include bombing or shelling cultural heritage sites or using significant cultural sites as military targets. In the Karabakh conflict, numerous architectural monuments, including churches and mosques of great cultural importance, were severely damaged (Omidi, 2022; Roeben & Jankovic, 2022; Talibli, 2024).

As for Ünlü et al. (2023), they examined Azerbaijan’s main activities to protect its intangible cultural heritage after the Karabakh war. They also described the particularities of strategic communication measures to protect elements of folk architecture. Their research shows that the Azerbaijani state developed distinctive daytime posts, internal events, corporate advertising, and



media initiatives (Foradori, 2016; Ünlü et al., 2023). Social media was actively used as part of operational public relations and, as a result, Azerbaijan effectively applied strategic communication management and strengthened its material culture after the war.

Other studies have highlighted the gaps in international law in addressing the Karabakh conflict (Rizvi, 2020; Wulan Christianti, 2024; Yemelianova, 2023). Some argue that existing international instruments failed to protect cultural sites effectively, pointing in particular to UNESCO's limited capacity to conduct monitoring and provide timely assistance to reduce destruction (European Parliament, 2006). According to Ünlü et al. (2023), a significant part of Azerbaijan's efforts has focused on restoring schools, educational institutions, bridges, and roads. Van Heese (2018) also analysed the long-term effects of war on the destruction of cultural heritage, noting that Azerbaijani cultural heritage remnants continue to be damaged, for example, when inscriptions on monuments are altered to Armenian.

Thus, modern scholarship has examined multiple dimensions of law enforcement in preserving cultural heritage during armed conflicts. Nevertheless, the literature shows that a more detailed and critical analysis is required to clarify the inconsistencies between national enforcement practices and international legal standards. Although many scholars outline general strategies and case studies, major disagreements remain concerning their effectiveness, appropriateness, and adaptability to regional wars such as the Karabakh conflict. Finally, this study therefore seeks to address these analytical gaps to provide a clearer understanding of the mechanisms and limitations of cultural heritage protection in armed conflicts.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **III.1. Research design**

The study is quantitative and qualitative and is based on the methods of legal analysis, content analysis of official documents, and empirical data. Therefore, the type of this study is mixed. In that sense, the selected design consisted of a review of the regulatory framework that provides a regulation of cultural heritage protection, analysis of official data of the Azerbaijani government, international reports and reviews, and scientific articles. The study used the Karabakh conflict case to assess the capacity of law enforcement agencies to protect cultural heritage during armed conflicts. The choice of the specified case is determined by the documented facts of the destruction of Azerbaijani cultural heritage sites, which occurred during the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent territories. Thus, the assessment of this case allows to identify individual mechanisms and difficulties of legal regulation and the activities of law enforcement agencies in the direction of cultural protection.

#### **III.2. Materials**

The study was based on the use of various types of sources:

1. Official data of the Government of Azerbaijan on the destruction of cultural heritage.
2. Regulatory and legal framework for ensuring the protection of cultural heritage of Azerbaijan.
3. International reviews and reports.
4. Scientific literature: articles, chapters from monographs.

The criteria for including materials were based on content relevance, time range, and language (English, Azerbaijani). Also, an important criterion was the involvement of sources that had undergone high-quality scientific expertise (review). Therefore, the works of experts in the field of international law and criminal law were also subject to involvement. The study involved scientific literature from 2000-2024; however, the emphasis was on including sources directly from 2020-2024. Table 1 presents the primary inclusion criteria.

**Table 1**  
*Criteria for including scientific sources*

Criteria	Description
Works that define the primary mechanisms for the protection of cultural heritage	Materials for protecting cultural heritage in regions affected by wars and conflicts were included.
Works describing the processes of ensuring the protection of cultural heritage in Azerbaijan during the Karabakh conflict	Studies that described key mechanisms for ensuring the protection of cultural heritage in Azerbaijan during the Karabakh conflict were included.
Type of sources	The study uses government reports, scientific articles and monographs, and regulatory and legal sources (Criminal Code and others).
Involving sources that are published in peer-reviewed journals	Scientific articles or chapters from monographs published in peer-reviewed journals, or recognized, authoritative publishing houses.
Writing language	The study is intended to include sources mainly in English. However, sources written in Azerbaijani are also considered. Sources in other languages are included only if an English summary is available.

*Note.* Compiled by the author.

At the same time, the exclusion criteria were based on the rejection of duplicates and works that describe unconfirmed information. Unverified publications, personal blogs and information from social networks without references to reliable sources were also excluded. In addition, the study did not include works that described general criminal activity unrelated to the selected case. Table 2 presents the main criteria for excluding scientific materials.

**Table 2**

*Criteria for excluding materials*

Criteria	Description
Works that do not define the primary mechanisms for protecting cultural heritage.	All materials that did not relate to protecting cultural heritage in regions affected by wars and conflicts were rejected.
Works that do not mention the processes of ensuring the protection of cultural heritage in Azerbaijan during the Karabakh conflict	Those studies that described only the general situation and did not indicate the key mechanisms for ensuring the protection of cultural heritage in Azerbaijan during the Karabakh conflict were rejected.
Duplicates	All duplicates and works that lacked theoretical novelty were subject to exclusion.
Sources that used unconfirmed information	All data that does not have official or scientific confirmation was subject to exclusion:  1. Unverified publications.  2. Personal blogs.  3. Posts from social networks without links to reliable sources.
Coverage of general criminal activity unrelated to the selected case	The study identified crimes against cultural heritage not caused by armed conflict.

*Note.* Compiled by the author.

### **III.3. Data analysis**

Content analysis and comparison methods were used to analyze the selected data. Content analysis was used to study legislative acts, official reports, international reviews, and scientific literature on the problem of cultural heritage protection during the Karabakh conflict. Data analysis was carried out in several stages: at the first stage, key categories were identified, like cultural heritage decline, legal regulation, regulatory framework, legal protection, and international mechanisms of responsibility. After this, coding was carried out using Microsoft Excel software.

In particular, the following data were entered into the relevant tables: author, year of writing, main mechanisms of legal protection of cultural heritage or identification of destruction of cultural heritage. Another table was also concerned with analysing international reports and regulatory acts. Accordingly, it focused on the following aspects: organization or name of the legal act, year of creation or adaptation, main legal mechanisms, and international mechanisms of responsibility. This way, it was possible to identify the main regulatory provisions and their compliance with international opinion. Finally, the study also used the method of comparative analysis for the obtained data in relation to the results of other scientists.

## **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

About two-thirds of the territory occupied by Armenia for almost 30 years was returned to Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War (Mozaffari & Barry, 2023). As a result, monuments now located on Azerbaijani-controlled

land can be re-registered and described. At the end of December 2022, the UNESCO asked the Azerbaijani Government to immediately allow an international commission to assess the condition of all historical and cultural monuments in Karabakh and the surrounding regions (Ibrahimova, 2023). Regarding this, researchers point out that unique monuments of local and world architecture, early Christian monuments, and monuments of the early and classical Middle Ages may be lost (Guðný Gröndal, 2023). Also, existing precedents indicate that the destruction of monuments can be a deliberate act.

However, although the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides highly value churches, mosques and other significant archaeological and architectural monuments as evidence of an ancient presence that supports claims to territory, the conflict in Karabakh is not, in fact, a religious war. More tellingly, Azerbaijani and Armenian historians are engaged in a fierce war over Karabakh economic zone. At the same time, they are of little interest in modern history. Researchers stubbornly adhere to the doctrine known as *prior tempore, or fortior jure* in Roman law, which states that the person who originally occupied the land is its owner forever, which is recognised by international law (Karimov, 2021). As a result, Karabakh has become a particular administrative-territorial entity whose past is “determined”, among other things, by the fighting.

Azerbaijan is one of the oldest regions of human settlement, with a rich history and diverse cultural heritage. Its distant past is evidenced by cave paintings, architectural monuments, works of art, and numerous artefacts discovered through archaeological excavations. However, the occupation of one-fifth of the country's territory inflicted a devastating blow on its cultural heritage. Armenia destroyed, looted, or appropriated more than 700 historical

monuments, 22 museums with 100 000 exhibits, 927 libraries, 58 archaeological sites, 26 fortresses, and many other cultural assets.

Among the monuments of national significance are Albanian monasteries dating from the 4th to the 14th centuries, medieval fortresses, mosques from the 18th and 19th centuries, and ancient archaeological sites. Particularly valuable examples include the monasteries of Agoglan, Amaras, and Khatiravang, the medieval castle of Asgaran, the mausoleum of Malik Ajdar, and other historical structures located in Lachin, Hojavënd, Khojali, Kalbajar, Gazakh, Fizuli, Jebail, Zangilan, Shusha, and Agdam. Numerous Bronze and Neolithic settlements, mounds, rock paintings, and necropolises were also damaged. In addition, the occupied regions contain monuments of world importance, such as the medieval Khudafarin bridges, the Gandzasar and Khudavang monasteries, the Azikh and Taglar caves, as well as ancient burial sites and archaeological complexes.

Karabakh is also the birthplace of many prominent cultural figures, including Vahif, Natavan, Nawab, Hajibeyov, and Bulbul, whose contributions to Azerbaijani and world cultural heritage have been internationally recognised. Nevertheless, the occupation led to a systematic policy of destruction of this heritage. Armenia deliberately destroyed monuments, altered their architectural appearance, and carried out so-called “archaeological” excavations to erase traces of Azerbaijani origin. An analysis of events after the 1994 ceasefire shows that most of the destruction of cultural monuments was not caused by hostilities but resulted from subsequent actions by the Armenian authorities. Already in the early 1990s, cultural landmarks in Shusha, including the Yukhara

and Ashagi Govgarag mosques with a madrassa, the Vahif mausoleum, the Natavan house, and a local caravanserai, were burned, destroyed, and looted.

After 2021, evidence confirmed that historical and cultural monuments of both Azerbaijani and world civilisation had been destroyed in Karabakh. In 1993 and 2000, Azerbaijan acceded to the first and second protocols of the 1954 Hague Convention (Safarov, 2020). This convention obliges states to protect immovable and movable cultural property, including monuments, works of art, architecture, and archaeological sites, both within their own territories and in those of opposing parties during armed conflict. Preliminary forensic assessments conducted according to international standards estimate the material damage caused to Azerbaijan and its citizens during the occupation at millions of USD. Similar reparations for damages inflicted by Armenia on Azerbaijani regions over the past 30 years have been addressed through international courts.

In Karabakh, the Azerbaijani Government has actively undertaken large-scale reconstruction. Development, rehabilitation, and restoration projects have been launched in Shusha, Aghdam, Fizuli, and other districts, including the restoration of historical and cultural sites (Europa Nostra & European Association of Archaeologists, 2021). At the same time, detailed documentation of illegal actions against Azerbaijani culture in Karabakh –such as the deliberate delay in restoring the mosque in Shusha– carried out under Azerbaijani law (The Law, 1998), requires accountability from the Armenian side.

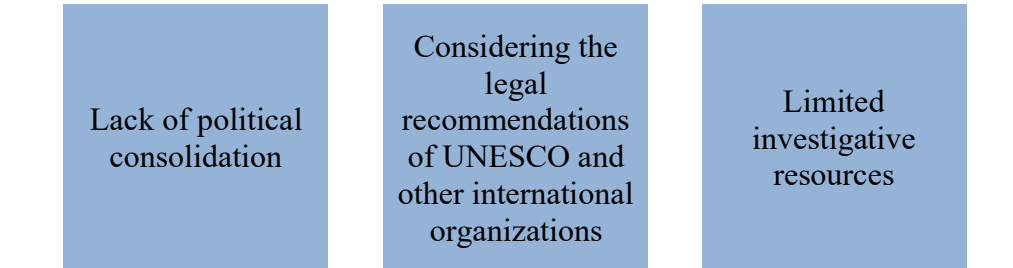
International observers generally agree that protecting cultural heritage in Karabakh requires a balanced position from both the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments (Figure 1). This creates significant challenges for law enforcement, as political and territorial disputes prevent a clear definition of



jurisdiction and responsibility. Resources for investigating crimes against cultural heritage are limited, and mechanisms for the restitution of stolen artefacts are insufficient (Pavoni, 2020). Consideration must also be given to international law, including the Rome Statute, as well as the standards and requirements of UNESCO (2020). The highly politicised nature of Karabakh’s history further hinders the preservation of its cultural heritage.

In that sense, the existing legal frameworks of both Armenia and Azerbaijan must provide effective protection against the destruction of cultural sites (Criminal Code, 2015). A shared commitment to preventing the destruction of the world heritage of both Azerbaijani and Armenian cultures could serve as a foundation for reconciliation and the long-term resolution of the conflict.

**Figure 1**  
*Difficulties in the legal regulation of the preservation of the cultural heritage  
of Nagorno-Karabakh*



*Note.* Compiled by the author.

The involvement of international forensic experts familiar with the destruction of monuments, together with updates to existing legislation on damage to cultural heritage, can provide a strong foundation not only for protecting cultural property but also for potential national reconciliation.

The protection of cultural heritage during hostilities is highly relevant, as each case demonstrates the capacity of international law to address the need to preserve both world heritage and the heritage of individual peoples. The primary objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in applying international and national legal norms, documentation mechanisms, and to identify the main difficulties. Addressing this task requires examining the legal mechanisms used by Azerbaijan and Armenia for cultural heritage protection during the Karabakh conflict, analysing law enforcement measures to document destruction, and characterising the principal challenges in investigating crimes against cultural heritage.

Therefore, the findings indicate that the Karabakh conflict posed a serious threat to the local cultural environment. To address this, UNESCO requested that the Azerbaijani Government immediately allow an international commission to assess the condition of historical and cultural monuments in Karabakh and surrounding areas. Many unique monuments may have been deliberately destroyed, a process intensified by ongoing scientific and political confrontation.

Under international law, particularly the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the intentional destruction of cultural heritage is considered a serious violation. The Rome Statute of the ICC also recognises attacks on historical monuments and cultural sites as war crimes (Melnyk, 2022; Redchits, 2016). In Azerbaijan, the systematic destruction of architectural and archaeological sites during and after the conflict poses a significant threat to the international legal order and requires an adequate legal response.

In many conflicts, attempts are made to reshape the cultural landscape by appropriating or distorting historical facts. In Karabakh, architectural monuments of Azerbaijani origin were either completely destroyed or presented as belonging to another culture. Such actions not only cause irreparable harm to historical heritage but also fuel new geopolitical conflicts, as cultural identity is a key factor in national self-determination. Given the extent of destruction in Azerbaijan, the issue of restoration is especially urgent. UNESCO's experience demonstrates that restoration is complex but necessary (Wani & Vats, 2024). Another critical step is the involvement of the international community in investigating the destruction and ensuring legal accountability for those responsible.

The findings also highlight specific investigative actions carried out based on data collected by Azerbaijan after 2021-2022. Police documentation revealed that historical and cultural monuments of both Azerbaijani and global significance were destroyed in Karabakh. Azerbaijan, having joined the protocols to the 1954 Hague Convention, is bound by the obligation to protect immovable and movable cultural property, including monuments, works of art, architecture, and archaeological sites, both on its own territory and on that of the opposing party during war. Police documentation also enabled the calculation of damages to Azerbaijani cultural sites and the formulation of legal claims for compensation.

These results support the conclusions of other scholars that the destruction of cultural monuments in Karabakh was politically motivated rather than rooted in religious confrontation between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (De Gregorio, 2024). At the same time, researchers note that scientific confrontation

produces differing interpretations of cultural monuments, which in turn influence national legislation, aimed primarily at protecting a state's own heritage (Aytekin & Okur, 2024; Foradori & Rosa, 2017). Some scholars therefore recommend the application of international legal norms and practices, as well as the organisational experience of international bodies in conducting investigations and prosecuting offenders (Bello, 2024; Green Martínez, 2014). This approach is particularly relevant in the Karabakh case, where opportunities for evidence collection have long been limited, and where the importance of local monuments renders them part of an interethnic cultural heritage.

An important aspect is the consideration of the norms of international law, particularly the Rome Statute, as well as the norms and requirements of UNESCO. Regarding this, it is necessary to mention that the issues of the history of Karabakh are overly politicized, which also does not contribute to the preservation of the region's cultural heritage. In various combinations, other researchers also point to these factors, which are challenges for conducting criminal trials in Karabakh and bringing those responsible for the destruction of cultural heritage to justice (Mammadova, 2021). Emphasis has rightly been placed on the politicization of the cultural history of the region, since open confrontation allows not to punish the guilty, but only to accuse each other of committing illegal acts (Beitler & Dugan, 2022; Weiss & Connelly, 2018; Zakharchuk, 2022). Despite the evidence, blocking the consideration of cases does not create prospects for criminal prosecution (Auganbai et al., 2020; Bleibleh & Awad, 2020).

The methodology used in the study has its limitations. First, the most relevant articles and other scientific publications were considered. At the same time, the conflict in Karabakh has been going on for more than a decade, so

there is a possibility that some relevant legal observations could have been made in older publications that were not the subject of scientific analysis. Although such a limitation does not deny the importance of the conclusions and generalizations made, this feature of using the PRISMA scientific approach is worth considering in subsequent interpretations of the results.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS**

The issue of protecting cultural heritage in the context of hostilities is highly relevant, and the example of the Karabakh conflict indicates the international and national possibilities of responding to the destruction of ancient sites. The conflict in Karabakh undoubtedly posed a threat to the local cultural environment. That is why UNESCO appealed to the Azerbaijani Government with a request to immediately allow an international commission to assess the condition of all historical and cultural monuments in Karabakh and the surrounding regions.

Finally, the Azerbaijani investigative authorities, based on documentary and factual evidence, established that historical and cultural monuments of both Azerbaijan and world civilization were destroyed in the territory of Karabakh. Consequently, the collected documentation made it possible to determine the extent of the damage suffered by Azerbaijani cultural objects. Furthermore, the information obtained may serve as the basis for formulating specific legal claims for compensation for the damage caused. Moreover, given the scale of destruction of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage, the issue of its restoration is of particular importance. In this regard, the experience of international organisations such as UNESCO demonstrates that the restoration of monuments

is a complex yet necessary process. In addition, an essential step is to involve the international community in investigating the facts of destruction and in ensuring the legal accountability of those responsible. At the same time, the destruction of cultural heritage should be understood not only as the physical elimination of historical monuments but also as a form of cultural aggression that produces long-term consequences for national identity. Therefore, an important task for the scientific community is to draw attention to this issue and to develop effective mechanisms to prevent such crimes in the future.

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