

The Tsaghkunk Declaration on Armenian Cultural Heritage Identification, Documentation and Handling (Management) (2023)

The Need for a Revised concept of Cultural heritage in the Republic of Armenia

The present Tsaghkunk Declaration on Armenian Cultural Heritage Identification, Documentation and Handling was passed by the participants of the workshop ‘Armenian Cultural Heritage. Identification, Documentation, Handling’ from October 26 to October 28, 2023. It was co-organized by the Armenian Studies Division of the University of Salzburg, the Armenian Interdisciplinary Cultural Heritage Studies at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography at the RA Academy of Sciences, the National Committee of The Blue Shield Austria and DAR Foundation for Regional Development and Competitiveness to bring together the young generation of local Armenian and international stakeholders to discuss issues and the need for changes of the post-soviet concept of Cultural Heritage in the Republic of Armenia, in particular facing the threat on Armenian cultural heritage in following of the armed conflicts on the territory of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh and between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the recent forcible displacement of the entire Armenian population of Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh from the ancestral settlement area.

The participant included academics, experts from local governmental organizations, UNESCO, The Blue Shield and Europa Nostra, from cultural heritage and cultural property protections research chairs and young researchers on the topic of Armenian heritage.

The workshop strives to give strong impulses and proposals to change and shape the existing concept of identification (and thus research), documentation and management, especially with regard to archiving, digitization and creation of databases, according to the latest research and practical approaches, but also the international agreements, declarations and conventions, among them basically 1954 The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflicts, 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the 1992 UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the 2003 Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage and the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, and the 2012 Cottbus Declaration on Cultural Heritage Studies.

The participants acknowledge that there exists a different understanding of heritage at governmental and church levels, as well as in academic community and among civil society; moreover, there are different approaches to its study, documentation, and management.

The assembled participants jointly declare their position on the following points:

1. Heritage identification: there is a need to clarify the definitions and criteria for monuments, cultural heritage, and cultural property. It should involve multiple stakeholders, including the state, non-state entities, religious institutions, academics, and civil society, in the classification process. There is a need to use a collaborative, bottom-up approach with an emphasis on cooperation and open discussions to make decisions about cultural assets. Moreover, the local laws and regulation on what is considered monument vs. cultural heritage vs. cultural property should be refined and updated according to international research, practical approaches and the practice of international conventions and declarations.
2. Cultural heritage documentation: Interdisciplinary and holistic, considering historical, aesthetic, and scientific aspects. Inclusive, involving the local community to assess socio-cultural, spiritual, and economic significance. Comprehensive, using all available sources to link tangible cultural objects to living intangible cultural traditions.
3. Cultural heritage management: Assessing cultural heritage with new technology requires clear data management and accessibility plans, addressing legal and ownership issues, and collaborating with government agencies, international organizations, and academics for effective data sharing.
4. Armenian civil society: to boost Armenian civil society's role in cultural heritage: - Involve civil society in identification and documentation. - Implement comprehensive education programs from pre-school to university. - Strengthen protection measures against looting. - Foster a positive state-civil society relationship. - Establish a dialogue between state, military, and civil society for heritage preservation.

The most important topics of the Tsaghkunk Declaration are thus the indispensable cooperation of all stakeholders including civil society in decision-making concerning cultural assets, the employment of interdisciplinary, holistic identification and documentation, the joint concept of data processing, storage and accessibility, as well as the mandatory involvement of the civil society and subsequently also of the military in matters concerning the preservation and protection of cultural heritage and properties.

Tsaghkunk, October 28th, 2023