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Serbian intangible cultural heritage in the Western Balkans:
Perils and prospects of inclusive research and safeguarding

POLICY OUTPUT 5.1

POLICY BRIEF
Advancing Cultural Heritage Governance and Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) Policy Integration in the Western Balkans

Executive Summary

Introduction

This policy brief presents a transformative approach to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) governance, social sciences and humanities (SSH) policy integration, and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans (WB). The proposed strategies aim to contribute to depoliticization of heritage, institutionalise regional collaboration, and elevate SSH disciplines in policymaking and education. The initiative envisions an Inter-State ICH Register as a pioneering model of cross-border heritage safeguarding, positioning the WB as a global leader in post-conflict cultural governance.

Policy Context and Challenges

The WB face multiple structural and political obstacles in cultural heritage management, including:
- Politicisation of ICH, leading to contested claims over shared heritage elements.
- Institutional fragmentation, preventing coordinated safeguarding efforts.
- Limited SSH representation in policy, weakening cultural research impact.
- Lack of sustainable funding and educational frameworks for heritage governance.
- Minimal regional cooperation, hindering a unified approach to cultural safeguarding.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-level policy intervention, integrating state, regional, and international frameworks for heritage safeguarding and SSH recognition.

Key Policy Recommendations

Establishing the Western Balkans Inter-State ICH Register
- A shared, institutionalised platform for identifying, documenting, and safeguarding ICH elements across the region.
- Developed in coordination with UNESCO, the Council of Europe (CoE), and the European Union (EU).
- Ensuring equitable representation of national, minority, and shared heritage elements, fostering inclusive and transparent heritage governance.
- Digital, open-access model to engage both scholars and local communities.
- Advisory board with independent experts to mediate heritage disputes.

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Strengthening SSH Integration in Cultural Policy and Education

Several important steps are needed:

- Curriculum reform to integrate ethnology and anthropology in school education.
- State-supported funding for SSH research, ensuring policy relevance and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Creation of regional academic research centres focused on cultural heritage and identity studies.
- Formal inclusion of SSH scholars in policymaking processes, ensuring applied SSH research informs governance.

Institutionalising Sustainable Heritage Governance

The institutionalisation of Heritage Governance and its sustainability would require:

- Establishing a Minority Heritage Ombudsman, responsible for ensuring inclusivity in ICH safeguarding.
- Developing multi-level ICH Registers at national, regional, and municipal levels.
- Strengthening cross-sector collaboration between governments, universities, museums, and civil society organisations.
- Long-term funding strategies based on national budget allocations, EU grants, and private-sector partnerships.

International Relevance and Strategic Partnerships

The WB Inter-State ICH Register and SSH integration strategies align with international frameworks, reinforcing:

- UNESCO's 2003 Convention on ICH (by institutionalising a cross-border safeguarding mechanism).
- The Council of Europe's (CoE) Faro Convention (through participatory heritage governance models).
- The EU's Creative Europe Programme (by fostering regional cultural cooperation).
- The OSCE and UNDP peacebuilding frameworks (by using ICH as a tool for post-conflict reconciliation).

Next Steps:

- Present the initiative at UNESCO and the Council of Ministers of Culture of South-East Europe Enhancing Culture for Sustainable Development (CoMoCoSEE) meetings.
- Secure EU and CoE funding commitments.
- Establish an ICH Steering Committee to oversee implementation.
- Launch a pilot project in select WB regions.

Conclusion: A Model for Global Heritage Governance

The proposed heritage governance and SSH integration strategy offers a scalable model for other post-conflict regions facing similar cultural disputes. By institutionalising inclusive, depoliticised, and sustainable heritage safeguarding, the WB can set a global precedent in cultural diplomacy and interdisciplinary policymaking. With strategic implementation, this initiative can position the WB as a leader in heritage governance, reinforcing culture as a bridge for peace rather than a source of division. This section provides an overview of the main findings of SICHWEB policy documents.

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D7.5.1 | Preventing ICH-Related Conflicts in the Western Balkans

Conflicts in the WB are deeply embedded in identity disputes, with intangible cultural heritage (ICH) serving both as a catalyst for tension and as a tool for reconciliation. The safeguarding of ICH varies widely between Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, shaped by institutional, political, and socio-cultural factors. The findings of this research highlight that ICH management in the region is fragmented, underfunded, and politicised, with contested narratives influencing its protection and representation. Minority, shared, and contested ICH elements remain underrepresented in official registers, creating an urgent need for institutional intervention and regional cooperation. Compared to technical cooperation in sectors such as justice, security, and infrastructure, regional collaboration in cultural policy is often deprioritised by the political leadership in SEE countries, despite its potential to foster stability and mutual understanding.

1. Systemic Issues in ICH-Related Conflicts

1.1 Institutional Fragmentation and Political Influence
- Serbia's centralised heritage protection system has been criticised for its bureaucratic inefficiency, favouring state-controlled institutions over local and multidisciplinary participation.
- Montenegro's cultural policy struggles with balancing national identity and inclusivity, and is often criticised by some representatives of the Serbian community in the country as sidelining Serbian cultural contributions while attempting to frame heritage as geographically rather than ethnically defined.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina's governance structure presents challenges for ICH protection, with differing perspectives on the institutional representation of Serbian cultural elements in the Federation of BiH.
- UNESCO nomination processes across the region have become politically charged, with heritage listings reinforcing ethno-national narratives rather than encouraging shared cultural recognition.

1.2 Cross-Border Heritage Disputes
- Ojkača singing and the Gusle epic tradition are examples of cultural traditions with overlapping claims among many WB states, highlighting the need for collaborative approaches to heritage recognition.
- Religious heritage sites are particularly vulnerable to politicisation, as seen in Montenegro's approach to Orthodox heritage, which has led to disputes over the classification of monasteries.
- Stećci, medieval tombstones shared across Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, illustrate how multinational heritage recognition can be both a unifying and divisive issue, as attested by joint nomination and inclusion on the international list.

1.3 Economic and Social Pressures
- Tourism-driven heritage commercialisation threatens local identity, as seen in Montenegro, where the economic value of cultural assets sometimes overrides historical authenticity.
- Urbanisation and globalisation are leading to heritage erosion, with younger generations becoming increasingly disconnected from traditional cultural practices.

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2. Strategies for Preventing ICH-Related Conflicts

2.1 Institutional and Policy Reforms

- Create regional ICH advisory bodies that include representatives from minority communities, ensuring participatory governance.
- Decentralise heritage protection to involve municipalities, independent cultural organisations, and academic institutions.
- Reduce state-controlled "heritage monopolies" by establishing multi-stakeholder decision-making frameworks.

2.2 Educational and Awareness Initiatives

- Integrate cross-border cultural education into national curricula, highlighting shared traditions rather than exclusive national ownership.
- Introduce media literacy programmes to prevent heritage-related conflicts from being exacerbated by nationalistic narratives.

2.3 Cross-Border Cooperation and International Engagement

- Expand the role of the Council of Ministers of Culture of South-East Europe (CoMoCoSEE) in facilitating dialogue over contested ICH elements.
- Revive frozen initiatives such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Task Force on Culture and Society, ensuring long-term engagement in cultural diplomacy.
- Encourage joint UNESCO nominations for disputed heritage elements, following the example of such transnational heritage listings as falconry.

3. The Role of ICH in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

ICH can serve as a platform for post-conflict reconciliation, intercultural dialogue, and regional stability when managed through collaborative and inclusive frameworks. International organisations, including UNESCO, the OSCE, the EU, and the Council of Europe, have recognised heritage's potential in promoting social cohesion in post-traumatic contexts.

However, current heritage diplomacy efforts have failed to prevent the repoliticisation of heritage and the rearmament of ethno-religious identity as a key source, where even international conventions are exploited to justify exclusionary narratives. To address this challenge, ICH protection must prioritise collaborative, depoliticised frameworks, ensuring that heritage remains a shared cultural resource rather than a source of geopolitical contention.

Key principles for ICH as a reconciliation tool:

- Ensure balanced representation in heritage governance structures, preventing unilateral cultural claims.
- Reframe heritage discussions as opportunities for intercultural learning, rather than ethno-national competition.
- Foster public-private partnerships and community-led initiatives, reducing dependence on state-controlled heritage narratives.

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