

**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.

## **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.

## D7.5.2 | The Feasibility of Forming an Inclusive Inter-State Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements Register for the Western Balkans

A unified inter-state intangible cultural heritage (ICH) register in the Western Balkans (WB) could mitigate conflicts over contested heritage while promoting shared cultural values. However, such an initiative requires careful planning, broad-based collaboration, and institutional legitimacy.

### 1. Key Challenges and Considerations

The findings of this research illustrate the significantly different ways in which ICH is currently defined, researched, safeguarded, and managed across the WB. In all cases, there is a critical issue around the underrepresentation of minority, shared, and contested ICH, which remains a politically sensitive issue requiring urgent intervention. The politicisation—and especially the internationalisation—of the “minority issue” in the form of culturalised bilateral conditionality in the absence of the safeguarding of minority cultural heritage should be prevented. To achieve this, following a dual approach—integrating both regional South-East European (SEE) frameworks and national safeguarding mechanisms—to ensure that minority heritage is protected within both regional and domestic cultural frameworks is advisable.

### 2. Institutional and Policy Reforms

Among the most important political, administrative, and cultural steps necessary to establish an inclusive inter-state ICH register are:

- **Harmonisation of National Policies:** Align national ICH safeguarding policies with UNESCO’s 2003 Convention and the Council of Europe (CoE)’s Faro Convention, ensuring a uniform regional approach.
- **Participatory Decision-Making:** Establish formal mechanisms for minority and community representation in ICH selection and safeguarding processes.
- **Institutional Coordination:** Create an independent body, such as a regional ICH safeguarding agency, to oversee the register, mediate disputes, and facilitate cooperation.
- **Multilateral Cooperation:** Utilise existing frameworks such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Task Force on Culture and Society and revitalise regional cultural dialogue forums.
- **Public Engagement and Transparency:** Develop open-access digital platforms where communities can contribute to and monitor the register’s development, ensuring civic participation and credibility.

### 3. Lessons from Regional Cultural Cooperation

The Council of Ministers of Culture of South-East Europe (CoMoCoSEE) has played a significant role in regional cultural cooperation. Additionally, the Regional Programme on Cultural and Natural Heritage in South-East Europe has already proven to be a major platform for joint rehabilitation and the documentation of tangible heritage. However, ICH safeguarding as a reconciliation tool has lagged behind. The RCC Task Force on Culture and Society has had limited activity since 2015, underscoring the need for renewed commitment and sustained funding to enhance its effectiveness.

Previous efforts, including the Belgrade and Ohrid Declarations and the Ljubljana Process, provide a strong foundation for future initiatives, yet they require reinvigoration with active participation from practitioners and scholars, rather than only high-level political engagement. The establishment of a well-structured, inclusive register could serve as a mechanism for preventing the political manipulation of heritage narratives, ensuring the equal representation of all cultural communities in the region.

### **4. Structural and Administrative Considerations**

#### **4.1 Regional and National Balance**

A key issue in forming an inclusive inter-state ICH register is ensuring that safeguarding efforts extend beyond national perspectives to embrace regional cooperation. As UNESCO and the CoE have emphasised, heritage should be safeguarded primarily in a way that fosters social cohesion, conflict prevention, and reconciliation. Minority representatives should not only be consulted but also formally included in decision-making structures related to ICH safeguarding. Their inclusion will strengthen the legitimacy of and foster trust in the register, particularly among historically marginalised groups.

The ICH Inclusive Safeguarding Network should be created at both national and regional levels, with an independent regional agency/organisation overseeing its work. This agency should be entrusted with initiating, evaluating, and implementing the detection, selection, analysis, safeguarding, and promotion of elements of minority and contested ICH. Special attention should also be given to the adaptation of the ICH safeguarding network in multicultural environments, including provinces, regions, and cities where heritage identities intersect.

#### **4.2 Sustainable Safeguarding through Institutionalisation.**

The inclusion of minority heritage within national registers should not be left to periodic, project-based initiatives but should instead be incorporated into state-governed, regionally or municipally co-funded, stable, and respected cultural institutions. Museums, libraries, and cultural centres but also NGO/CSOs should play a central role in sustaining such an inclusive framework. Public engagement should also be actively encouraged through forums, seminars, workshops, and conferences aimed at fostering dialogue on contested heritage and countering nationalist exclusivity.

### **5. The Role of Academia and Research in ICH Safeguarding**

A comprehensive inter-state ICH register will require a robust interdisciplinary research component. Scholars from ethnology, anthropology, cultural heritage studies, and legal studies should be involved in guiding and evaluating the selection process. Existing academic programmes should incorporate training on ICH safeguarding to ensure a steady pipeline of professionals equipped to manage this complex cultural and political process.

Additionally, comparative regional studies on ICH safeguarding practices should be encouraged to identify best practices and adapt successful models from other multiethnic regions (e.g., the Nordic-Baltic region, the Alpine region, or the Danube cooperation model).

## 6. Long-Term Cultural Reconciliation and Regional Stability

Ultimately, an inclusive inter-state ICH register represents a necessary step toward sustainable cultural reconciliation and peacebuilding in the WB. With the appropriate institutional frameworks, multilateral cooperation, and community engagement, it is feasible to create a register that not only safeguards shared and minority heritage but also serves as a tool for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation across the region.

### **Key Recommendations for Implementation:**

- Revitalise regional cultural dialogue mechanisms, ensuring sustained engagement from governments, institutions, and scholars.
- Ensure equitable representation of minority and shared heritage elements in the register, avoiding majoritarian or politically driven narratives.
- Establish transparent governance models, with balanced participation from cultural institutions, academic experts, and civil society organisations.
- Encourage long-term funding commitments from both national and international heritage agencies to avoid reliance on short-term projects.
- Develop multilingual digital resources and open-access repositories, making heritage documentation available across different linguistic and ethnic communities.

By embracing these principles, an inter-state ICH register can evolve into a dynamic platform for heritage safeguarding, regional cooperation, and cultural diplomacy, fostering a more inclusive, historically conscious, and reconciliatory future for the WB.

The initiative to form an inclusive inter-state ICH register for the WB is proposed as an original concept, as there is no known global precedent where multiple states collaborate on a shared register of ICH elements on this scale, particularly in a post-conflict region with deep historical grievances.

### **Comparative Global Context: Are There Similar Models?**

While some regional and multinational heritage collaborations exist, none operate in precisely the same way as the proposed inter-state ICH register for the WB. However, the following cases provide partial parallels that could inform and strengthen this initiative:

#### **1. Transnational UNESCO Nominations (A Precedent for Shared ICH)**

UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has recognised multi-state nominations, including:

- Falconry (recognised across 24 countries, including several European and Middle Eastern states).
- The Mediterranean Diet (shared by Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Cyprus, Portugal, and Croatia).
- Lavash, Flatbread Making (shared by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey).

### What's Different?

- These transnational nominations focus on a single cultural element rather than an inter-state repository of multiple contested heritage elements.
- The proposed WB ICH register would institutionalise ongoing cooperation and research beyond a single listing.

## 2. Nordic-Baltic Cultural Cooperation

The Nordic Council of Ministers promotes regional cultural exchange and heritage collaboration among Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, including:

- Shared digital heritage platforms.
- Funding for cross-border cultural projects.

The Baltic Assembly (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) has similar programmes.

### What's Different?

- These models promote heritage exchange but do not maintain a unified ICH register.

## 3. The European Heritage Label (EHL)

The EHL (launched by the EU) highlights sites that symbolise European integration and shared history.

### What's Different?

- It applies only to tangible cultural heritage (sites, landmarks), not ICH traditions, practices, or customs.
- It is EU-centric, while the proposed ICH register would include several EU candidate states.

## 4. ASEAN Cultural Heritage Programs

ASEAN countries (Southeast Asia) have regional heritage frameworks but mainly focus on:

- Tourism-based heritage promotion.
- Shared traditional medicine databases.

### What's Different?

- ASEAN heritage initiatives do not formalise a unified ICH register.

### ***Why is the WB ICH Register an Original Initiative?***

- No current global initiative focuses on a regional, multi-state ICH register addressing contested heritage. The proposed model incorporates governance, transparency, minority representation, and digital access—all in one framework. It directly addresses ICH as a reconciliation tool in a historically divided region. It moves beyond isolated UNESCO nominations, providing an evolving platform for regional cooperation.
- It would be legally viable as it would adhere to the ICH Convention while keeping all existing national regimes and institutions for ICH protection.

### Potential for Global Recognition

If successfully implemented, this initiative could serve as a model for other post-conflict regions with contested cultural heritage, such as:

- The Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia)
- The Middle East (Israel-Palestine, Syria-Lebanon)
- Post-colonial African heritage debates

### Next Steps for International Positioning

- Engage UNESCO and the CoE to explore how this register could be a pilot project for global heritage governance.
- Publish a white paper presenting the WB as a test case for a new heritage diplomacy model.
- Invite comparative research from international scholars to analyse the impact of similar efforts in divided regions.

## Strategic Proposal: International Positioning of the WB Inter-State ICH Register

### 1. Introduction

The WB Inter-State ICH Register represents a pioneering initiative in global heritage governance. It seeks to address historical disputes over ICH through a structured, multi-state framework, fostering reconciliation, regional cooperation, and sustainable cultural safeguarding. Unlike existing UNESCO transnational nominations, the proposed ICH register establishes an ongoing governance model, integrating state and non-state actors to prevent cultural exclusivism, enhance regional dialogue, and institutionalise the protection of shared and contested heritage elements. This document outlines a strategy for presenting the initiative to international organisations, regional governments, and global heritage institutions, ensuring political buy-in, financial support, and long-term viability.

### 2. Objectives of the Strategy

The core objectives of the strategy are to:

- Secure recognition and endorsement from UNESCO, the CoE, the EU, and the OSCE.
- Obtain political commitment from WB governments to integrate the register into national heritage policies.
- Establish a financial and technical cooperation framework, including access to EU cultural funding, UNESCO capacity-building programmes, and public-private partnerships.
- Position the WB as a global model for heritage governance in post-conflict regions.
- Ensure the Register's long-term institutional sustainability and digital accessibility

### 3. Global Context and Justification

No similar initiative currently exists at the global level. While UNESCO recognises multi-state ICH nominations, there is no permanent, regionally governed ICH register for contested and shared heritage. The WB—historically marked by identity-based conflicts—offers a unique case for:

- Piloting a new model of cultural diplomacy, applicable to other post-conflict regions.
- Institutionalising shared heritage governance, beyond temporary project-based efforts.
- Aligning with global peacebuilding frameworks, using cultural heritage as a tool for stability.

Existing initiatives such as the Nordic Council of Ministers on Cultural Cooperation, the ASEAN Heritage Network, and the European Heritage Label (EHL) focus on cultural exchange but lack a binding, intergovernmental mechanism for ICH safeguarding. The WB initiative would be the first structured, multi-state ICH register with permanent oversight mechanisms.

### 4. Key Institutional Stakeholders

#### **Global Organisations:**

- UNESCO: Endorsement under the 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- CoE: Integration within the Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society.
- EU: Funding and support via Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, and the European Heritage Label programme.
- OSCE and UNDP: Positioning within their conflict prevention and peacebuilding frameworks.
- ICOMOS and ICH-NGO Forum: Technical expertise and advisory functions.

#### **Regional Governments:**

- Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo\*: Formal commitment to integrate the register into national heritage safeguarding mechanisms.
- RCC and CoMoCoSEE: Facilitation of diplomatic and institutional coordination.

#### **Academic and Cultural Institutions:**

- National heritage institutes and universities: Research collaboration and policy advisory roles.
- Museums, libraries, and cultural centres: Custodianship and public engagement platforms.
- Civil society and minority cultural organisations: Ensuring grassroots participation and inclusivity.

## 5. Strategic Action Plan

### **Phase 1: Diplomatic and Institutional Endorsement (Months 1-6)**

- Secure official endorsement from UNESCO and CoE.
- Hold a ministerial roundtable with WB governments, facilitated by CoMoCoSEE.
- Establish a working group under RCC for ICH cooperation.

### **Phase 2: Research and Technical Development (Months 6-12)**

- Conduct a comparative study on similar regional cultural frameworks.
- Define the legal, administrative and technical structure of the register.
- Develop ICH safeguarding guidelines to standardise selection and inclusion criteria.

### **Phase 3: Pilot Implementation and Funding Mobilisation (Months 12-24)**

- Identify funding sources from the EU, UNESCO, and national governments.
- Launch a digital prototype of the ICH register with initial entries.
- Implement a public engagement campaign to promote awareness.

### **Phase 4: Full Rollout and Institutionalisation (Months 24+)**

- Formalise the regional ICH safeguarding agency/organisation.
- Expand the register to include all shared ICH elements across the WB.
- Monitor and evaluate impact, ensuring long-term policy integration.

## 6. Expected Impact and Global Relevance

If successfully implemented, the WB ICH Register will:

- Establish a groundbreaking precedent in heritage diplomacy.
- Serve as a blueprint for post-conflict cultural cooperation worldwide.
- Strengthen regional peacebuilding through shared cultural narratives.
- Improve access to global funding and heritage development programs.
- Foster academic and civil society engagement in ICH protection.

This initiative offers a unique opportunity for the Western Balkans to lead on the global stage in innovative heritage governance, intercultural dialogue, and conflict prevention. Its success could inspire similar models in regions facing cultural disputes, reinforcing heritage as a force for unity rather than division.

## 7. Feasibility Assessment: Opportunities, Risks, and Obstacles

### Opportunities:

- Enhances cultural cooperation and reconciliation in a historically divided region.
- Increases international visibility and funding access, particularly through EU and UNESCO programmes.
- Positions the WB as a leader in global heritage governance, potentially inspiring similar initiatives in other post-conflict regions.
- Provides a framework for economic benefits through cultural tourism and sustainable heritage initiatives.
- Encourages grassroots participation and democratic cultural policymaking.

### Risks and Obstacles:

- Concerns from actors emphasizing national identity will pose challenges to shared heritage recognition, requiring careful dialogue and trust-building measures.
- Lack of institutional capacity within some WB states to manage the register effectively.
- Funding instability, particularly if reliant on short-term EU cultural grants rather than long-term governmental commitments.
- Potential disagreements over the inclusion of contested ICH elements, leading to diplomatic tensions rather than reconciliation.
- Digital infrastructure challenges, including ensuring multilingual access and open data policies.

### Mitigation Strategies:

- Implement a phased approach to building political support, ensuring that governments see value in the initiative.
- Engage local communities and minority groups early, preventing elite-driven narratives that may exclude key stakeholders.
- Secure diversified funding sources, combining EU, UNESCO, national government, and private sector contributions.
- Establish an independent ICH Advisory Board, including neutral international experts to oversee contested nominations.
- Develop robust digital infrastructure, ensuring that the register is open-source, transparent, and publicly accessible.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The WB Inter-State ICH Register represents an unparalleled opportunity to transform regional heritage cooperation into a structured, inclusive, and internationally recognised model. By aligning with global heritage governance frameworks and securing institutional commitments from national and international stakeholders, this initiative can serve as a catalyst for cultural diplomacy and sustainable peace.