

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.

D7.5.3 | Reaffirming and Integrating Nationally and Regionally Oriented SSH Research into School Curricula and State Research Agendas in Western Balkan States

1. Introduction

Social sciences and humanities (SSH) research has often been marginalised in policy development and education within the Western Balkans (WB). Despite its potential SSH remains underfunded and undervalued in state-supported research and curricula. Current research evaluation and financing systems emphasize scientometric indicators and international recognition, which limit opportunities for locally and regionally focused SSH research. This focus neglects the societal impact of SSH, particularly in areas such as cultural heritage safeguarding, identity-based conflict prevention, and policy development. To address this gap, a strategic shift is necessary, emphasising SSH research that connects academic insights with real-world policy and educational needs.

2. Key Challenges in SSH Recognition and Inclusion

2.1 Marginalisation of SSH in Policy and Education

- SSH disciplines are regularly sidelined in national research funding in favour of STEM fields.
- Current evaluation metrics favour international publications, neglecting the impact of SSH on local and regional development.
- Policy frameworks rarely integrate and utilise SSH expertise, leading to missed opportunities for conflict prevention, reconciliation, and heritage preservation.

2.2 Limited Institutional Support and Funding for Applied SSH Research

- SSH departments in WB universities often face funding constraints, with limited dedicated research centres focusing on heritage and identity.
- Lack of interdisciplinary collaboration between SSH scholars and policymakers results in fragmented cultural heritage policies.
- Public engagement in SSH research remains low, limiting its role in shaping cultural policies and educational programmes.

3. Strategies for Strengthening SSH in Policy and Education

To enhance the role of SSH in education and policy, the following measures should be implemented:

3.1 Curriculum Reform

- Integrate SSH research into school programmes, emphasising shared heritage, identity construction, and regional reconciliation.
- Develop critical thinking modules that encourage students to analyse cultural narratives, media representation, and contingent historical interpretations.
- Expand the role of cultural anthropology, ethnology, history and other humanities in school curricula to promote an inclusive understanding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and shared regional history.

3.2 Institutional Recognition and Research Support

- Establish regional research centres for cultural heritage and identity, ensuring SSH disciplines play a central role in policy advisory mechanisms.
- Create dedicated funding mechanisms for SSH projects aligned with national and regional development goals.
- Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between SSH scholars and STEM researchers, educators, and policymakers.

3.3 Strengthening SSH Research in Cultural Heritage and Identity

- Promote SSH research as a tool for conflict prevention, reconciliation, and cross-border cooperation.
- Increase state and EU support for ICH research, ensuring SSH plays a leading role in its documentation and safeguarding.
- Incentivise SSH research of international frameworks such as UNESCO's 2003 Convention and the Council of Europe (CoE)'s Faro Convention, reinforcing heritage-based diplomacy.

4. Enhancing the Impact of SSH Research on Policy and Society

SSH disciplines have historically contributed to cultural critique and theoretical discourse, but their practical application must be reaffirmed. By strengthening knowledge-to-policy mechanisms, SSH research can become a valuable asset in regional stability and cultural policy development.

4.1 Expanding SSH Contributions to Policy Development

- Formalise SSH research's role in cultural policymaking, ensuring that ethnologists, historians, etc. are involved in government advisory bodies.
- Shift from publication-based impact assessment to a model that evaluates SSH contributions to education, policy formulation, and public discourse.
- Promote SSH engagement in public institutions, including museums, cultural centres, and community-based heritage projects.

4.2 Institutionalising SSH in Conflict Prevention and Reconciliation

- Address identity-based conflicts through curriculum reforms that reflect diverse historical narratives.
- Encourage joint SSH research projects between states to foster cross-border dialogue on shared cultural heritage.
- Develop training programs for policymakers and educators, ensuring SSH expertise is applied in cultural heritage management and peacebuilding efforts.

5. Regional and International Cooperation

Strengthening SSH research requires collaboration at national, regional, and international levels:

- Regional Cooperation: WB governments should harmonise SSH research funding policies to ensure cross-border projects on ICH and identity-based reconciliation.
- EU and UNESCO Integration: SSH projects should be linked to Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, and UNESCO funding to ensure financial sustainability.
- Public-Private Partnerships: Increase investment from private institutions, heritage NGOs, and cultural tourism industries to support SSH research in ICH safeguarding.

Conclusion: The Strategic Importance of SSH in the Western Balkans

SSH research is not merely an academic discipline—it is a strategic necessity for fostering regional stability, sustainable development, and inclusive heritage safeguarding. By institutionalising SSH within national policy frameworks, education systems, and international cultural diplomacy, the Western Balkans can:

- Enhance cultural heritage preservation through interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Address historical grievances and identity-based conflicts through evidence-based policymaking.
- Foster social cohesion and mutual understanding across ethnic and national divides.
- Ensure that SSH is recognised as a vital contributor to state development and European integration.

By adopting these measures, WB states can reposition SSH as a core component of national development, ensuring that its insights are applied in education, policymaking, and cultural heritage safeguarding for future generations.

Recommendations for cultural and academic policymakers in Serbia: Utilising Academic Knowledge for Cultural Heritage Safeguarding and Future Funding Strategies

Since this project is funded by the Serbian Science Fund, ensuring that academic research contributes to policy development, heritage preservation, and international collaboration is essential. Below are key recommendations on how the Serbian Science Fund (SSF) and other policymakers in sectors like academia and culture can optimise their investments in academic knowledge production, cultural heritage utilisation, and future funding priorities.

1. Strengthen the Role of Academic Research in Cultural Heritage Policy

Institutionalise Research into Heritage Policy Frameworks

Create a Serbian Cultural Heritage Research Hub (SCHR)

- SSF should establish a permanent research centre or consortium focused on Serbian ICH in the wider WB region.
- The hub should function as an advisory body for policy-makers, cultural institutions, and international heritage organisations.

Develop a Policy Brief Series Based on Research Findings

- Research outcomes from this project should be translated into policy recommendations for:
 - Serbian cultural institutions.
 - Serbian government bodies (Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).
 - International organisations (UNESCO, CoE, EU heritage funds).

Establish a Knowledge Transfer Programme Between Academia and Policy-Makers

- Organise annual policy roundtables where researchers present findings directly to decision-makers.
- Ensure that academic work is published in policy-friendly formats, not just academic journals.
- Develop executive summaries and visual reports for non-academic stakeholders.

Support Regional and International Collaboration in Heritage Research

Fund Cross-Border Heritage Studies with Bosnian and Montenegrin Scholars

- SSF should partner with universities and research institutions to:
 - Promote joint academic studies on shared cultural heritage.
 - Reduce political resistance by involving local researchers in heritage documentation.

Promote Serbian Cultural Heritage Through International Research Networks

- SSF should connect Serbian scholars with global research institutions specialising in:
 - Cultural heritage management (UNESCO, ICOMOS).
 - Balkan studies and Slavic cultural history (Oxford, Harvard, Sorbonne).
 - EU-funded heritage research programmes (Creative Europe, Horizon Europe).

Develop a Serbian Digital Heritage Repository

- This open-access digital archive should collect and systematise:
 - Serbian ICH research materials (articles, ethnographic studies, interviews, visual documentation).
 - Historical records of Serbian heritage sites in neighbouring countries.

2. Optimise Future Funding Strategies for Cultural Heritage Safeguarding

Expand Funding to Cover Interdisciplinary Cultural Heritage Studies

Support a Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Heritage Studies

- Future funding calls should encourage projects that integrate:
 - Ethnology & Anthropology (Intangible heritage documentation).
 - Digital Humanities (3D heritage mapping, AI-driven archiving).
 - Political Science & International Relations (Cultural diplomacy & policy analysis).
 - Tourism Studies (Sustainable cultural tourism strategies).

Encourage Research on Cultural Heritage Law & Human Rights Safeguarding

- Future SSF projects should examine legal frameworks for protecting Serbian heritage in contested regions.
- Support studies on:
 - The legal status of religious and cultural heritage.
 - How international heritage law (UNESCO, EU) can support Serbian heritage claims.

Fund Public Engagement and Cultural Diplomacy Efforts

Promote Serbian Cultural Heritage through Public Awareness Campaigns

- Fund digital storytelling projects to make academic research more accessible to the public.
- Create multimedia content (documentaries, podcasts, interactive websites) to engage audiences beyond academia.

Invest in Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives

- SSF should fund projects that help position Serbian cultural heritage in international heritage forums.
- Develop academic research-based heritage exhibitions that can travel to:
 - UNESCO headquarters.
 - European heritage conferences.
 - Cultural festivals in Serbian diaspora communities.

Strengthen the Long-Term Impact of Heritage Research Funding

Establish a Long-Term Heritage Research Fund

- Instead of short-term projects, SSF should establish multi-year funding streams for:
 - Longitudinal heritage studies tracking cultural changes over time.
 - Continuous updates to digital archives and heritage inventories.

Create a Serbian Heritage Fellowship Programme

- Fund PhD and postdoctoral research on Serbian cultural heritage, with special focus on:
 - Heritage diplomacy and international cultural policy.
 - The role of religious institutions in heritage preservation.
 - Serbian cultural communities in the region.

3. Position Serbian Research as a Leader in WB Cultural Heritage Studies

Expanding the Impact of Research Beyond Serbia

Develop Serbia as a Regional Hub for WB Heritage Studies

- SSF should support a permanent WB Heritage Research Programme that includes:
 - Collaboration with scholars from Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia, and North Macedonia.
 - Annual WB Heritage Conferences held in rotation in major academic centres in the region.

Encourage Serbian Scholars to Participate in International Cultural Policy Debates

- SSF should fund:
 - Research presentations at UNESCO heritage policy conferences.
 - Participation in EU-funded research consortia on cultural heritage safeguarding.
 - Engagement with international academic publishers to promote Serbian research on cultural heritage.

Host International Fellowships for WB Heritage Experts

- SSF could fund short-term fellowships for scholars from WB countries to conduct research on Serbian cultural heritage in Serbia.

Conclusion: How the Serbian Science Fund Can Shape the Future of Serbian Cultural Heritage Safeguarding

To maximise its impact, SSF should:

- Institutionalise research into Serbian cultural heritage policy frameworks.
- Fund interdisciplinary and cross-border studies to strengthen regional cooperation.
- Expand research funding into legal, diplomatic, and tourism-based heritage safeguarding.
- Create long-term research structures (digital archives, fellowships, and heritage policy think tanks).
- Position Serbia as a global research hub for Balkan cultural heritage studies.

Final Thought: Why This Matters

Cultural heritage relevant to Serbia in the WB should be documented, studied, and presented through internationally recognized methodologies to support heritage safeguarding efforts. The Serbian Science Fund has a unique opportunity to shape Serbia's academic leadership in cultural heritage studies, ensuring that future heritage debates are guided by facts, research, and internationally accepted best practices. Research-based heritage safeguarding, transformed into heritage-based diplomacy as a stream within cultural diplomacy more generally, is found to be the best solution.