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

POLICY OUTPUT 5.4

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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D7.5.4 | Novel Tools, Measures, and Institutions for Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding in the Western Balkans

1. Introduction

To ensure the long-term safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the Western Balkans (WB), novel institutional frameworks, tools, and collaborative mechanisms must be established. ICH safeguarding in the region faces structural challenges, including the need for strengthened institutional frameworks, broader representation of diverse heritage traditions, and enhanced regional cooperation. While initiatives such as the Council of Ministers of Culture of South-East Europe (CoMoCoSEE) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) have launched various cultural heritage programmes, many have stalled due to organisational constraints and political disengagement. To overcome these limitations, new, durable approaches must be developed to institutionalise safeguarding processes and improve regional cooperation. This document outlines strategic measures to establish a sustainable, inclusive, and regionally coordinated ICH safeguarding framework. It goes further in proposing a novel model of inclusive ICH safeguarding on a regional level that can be tested and then replicated in other regions of the world.

2. Key Challenges in ICH Safeguarding

2.1 Fragmented Governance and Lack of Institutional Coordination

- ICH safeguarding efforts are frequently undertaken by universities, NGOs, and independent researchers, highlighting the need for greater integration with state-led cultural policies.
- Heritage management structures differ across WB states, leading to inconsistent standards and recognition processes.
- The lack of cross-border coordination weakens efforts to protect shared and contested heritage elements in the multi-ethnic region with conflict legacies.

2.2 Political Sensitivities and Heritage Disputes

- Contested heritage claims create ethnic and political tensions, limiting opportunities for multi-ethnic heritage collaboration.
- The absence of a regional conflict-resolution mechanism for ICH disputes prevents the fair and transparent adjudication of contested heritage elements

2.3 Limited Financial and Human Resources

- Project-based funding models create instability, as ICH safeguarding initiatives often depend on short-term external grants.
- The lack of trained professionals in ICH management limits capacity-building efforts and sustainability.

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3. Institutional and Policy Recommendations for Strengthening ICH Safeguarding

To address these challenges, the following measures should be implemented:

3.1 Establishing Independent and Inclusive Governance Structures
- Institutional Structure: Develop an independent body, such as a regional ICH safeguarding agency, to oversee the register, ensuring transparency and multilateral engagement of the relevant national institutions.
- Regional ICH Coordination Council: A neutral, independent body that provides expert guidance, standardises safeguarding procedures, and ensures compliance with UNESCO and Council of Europe (CoE) guidelines.
- ICH Inclusive Safeguarding Network: A regional network involving museums, cultural institutions, universities, and local communities, fostering knowledge-sharing and best practices.

3.2 Strengthening Community Participation in ICH Protection
- Community-Led ICH Initiatives: Encourage participatory heritage management through local councils and cultural associations, ensuring that safeguarding efforts are bottom-up and not exclusively state-controlled.
- ICH Registers at Multiple Levels: Develop national, regional, and municipal ICH registers to reflect the diversity of cultural heritage across different ethnic and geographic communities.
- Digital ICH Archives: Establish open-access digital platforms that allow communities to document and track safeguarding efforts, promoting public engagement and knowledge-sharing.

3.3 Securing Long-Term Funding and Institutional Support
- Policy-Driven Funding Models: Establish permanent budgetary allocations for ICH safeguarding, ensuring long-term financial sustainability rather than reliance on external, short-term grants.
- Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Encourage investment from cultural tourism, heritage-related businesses, and international donors to expand funding streams.
- Regional Grant Programmes: Utilise EU programs such as Creative Europe and Horizon Europe to support cross-border heritage cooperation.

3.4 Enhancing the Role of Education and Research in ICH Safeguarding
- Dedicated University Programmes for ICH Professionals: Strengthen higher education curricula in cultural heritage research and management, ensuring a new generation of trained experts.
- Specialised ICH Departments in Museums, Libraries and Cultural Centres: Establish dedicated teams in national and regional institutions to oversee heritage preservation, community engagement, and education.
- Interdisciplinary Training Programmes: Integrate cultural anthropology, history, ethnology, and digital humanities focused on heritage studies into ICH professional development programmes.

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4. Enhancing Cross-Border Cooperation and Institutional Sustainability

ICH in the WB is often shared across national borders, making regional cooperation critical for long-term safeguarding efforts. The following steps should be prioritised:

- Revive stalled regional initiatives such as the RCC Task Force on Culture and Society, ensuring ongoing cultural diplomacy efforts.
- Encourage joint UNESCO nominations for shared ICH elements, promoting a more inclusive approach to heritage recognition.
- Work on the harmonisation of heritage protection laws across the region, reducing discrepancies in safeguarding mechanisms and enabling the inclusive shared system of protection to work.
- Facilitate regional heritage forums and expert panels, ensuring that contested heritage is discussed transparently and resolved through evidence-based decision-making.

5. Promoting Public Engagement and Awareness

Public awareness is essential for preserving and valuing ICH. To enhance engagement, the following measures should be implemented:

- Cultural Awareness Campaigns: Develop multimedia projects, exhibitions, and educational materials that emphasise the multicultural nature of ICH.
- Interactive Digital Platforms: Establish open-access heritage databases where communities can submit, document, and learn about ICH elements.
- Anti-Discrimination and Cultural Sensitivity Programmes: Implement training programmes to prevent cultural exclusion, misrepresentation, and xenophobic narratives related to heritage.

Conclusion: A Multi-Sectoral Approach to ICH Safeguarding

To ensure the long-term safeguarding of ICH in the WB, a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach must be adopted. This requires:

- The establishment of sustainable governance structures, ensuring heritage protection is systematic and not project-based.
- A balance between community participation and institutional oversight, preventing both top-down control and fragmented, uncoordinated efforts.
- Financial sustainability through state, EU, and private-sector funding, ensuring ICH safeguarding is not dependent on short-term initiatives.
- A commitment to education and research, creating a pipeline of trained heritage professionals who can support policy implementation.
- A reinvigorated regional cooperation framework, ensuring harmonised heritage protection policies across the Western Balkans.