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

POLICY OUTPUT 5.6

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.

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БЕОГРАДУ
ФИЛОЗОФСКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ
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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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D7.5.6 | Overall Impressions from the Focus Group Discussions on Intangible Cultural Heritage in Serbia

After analysing the focus groups, several consistent themes, issues, and conclusions emerge. These discussions provide a comprehensive critique of Serbia's approach to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding, highlighting:

- **institutional weaknesses**
- **political influences**
- **the tension between academic research and community engagement.**

1. Key Themes Across All Focus Groups

1.1. Institutional and Bureaucratic Challenges

- Serbia's institutional approach to ICH safeguarding is methodologically fragmented, yet at the same time highly centralized, leading to perceived inefficiencies in the recognition, research, documentation, and safeguarding of ICH. This issue is crucial for recognizing the equal status of the heritage of ethnic, religious, and other cultural minorities.
- The Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Serbia at the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade plays a central role in coordinating decision-making. However, some interlocutors suggest that there may be room for greater involvement of regional museums, universities, research institutes, and local heritage organizations in the process.
- Funding issues persist, with ICH safeguarding often receiving limited financial support beyond ceremonial UNESCO recognitions, making it unsustainable. This issue is revisited in several places within the recommendations, and it is crucial to highlight the discovery of a whole field of opportunities for private sector investment, particularly in terms of corporate social responsibility through support for achieving the SDGs.
- The ICH nomination process is perceived as bureaucratic, making it difficult for communities and independent scholars to participate effectively. This, however, is a matter of contestation, as many scholars view bureaucratisation as a "necessarily evil"—a voluntarism prevention tool ensuring identity entrepreneurs and day-to-day politics have a final say.

1.2. The Role of Scholars and the Gap Between Theory and Practice

- Academic researchers and practitioners bring diverse perspectives to heritage discussions. Expanding interdisciplinary collaboration can ensure broader inclusion of expertise from various disciplines. As explained below, ethnology, as the primary field of expertise, can maintain its academic jurisdiction in the process of expanding this framework for expertise and other disciplines.
- The theoretical, top-down approach to heritage often neglects grassroots engagement and the lived experience of heritage bearers, and should be diversified without compromising expertise.
- Some scholars and experts have disproportionate influence on national heritage listings, leading to a lack of transparency and diversity in heritage recognition. As a result, minority, urban, and non-folklore-based heritage is excluded from both the concept of heritage itself and the practice of its safeguarding.

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1.3. Political and Nationalist Influences on ICH

- ICH has been politicised and used as a tool for national identity-building, often framed in exclusive terms rather than as a shared cultural resource. This is the most important issue we encounter when researching heritage preservation policies. As a symbol of identity and continuity, ICH has become an instrument for pursuing goals that contradict UNESCO's initial intentions (a concern we address throughout these recommendations).
- Interlocutors pointed to some of the most sensitive examples of contested heritage elements:
  - Guslar tradition: Recognised by Serbia but also practiced in Montenegro and Bosnia (Croatian, Albania etc.) leading to debates over ownership.
  - Ojkača singing: Listed by Croatia in UNESCO, despite its historical presence in Serbia and Bosnia, causing resentment in Serbia.
  - Dužijanca harvest festival: Contested between Bunjevci and Croats in Subotica, creating political and ethnic disputes over its recognition.
- The media exacerbate these conflicts, portraying heritage as something that must be defended from "theft" by neighbouring countries, rather than as a point of collaboration.

1.4. Community Engagement and Fieldwork Ethics

- Local communities are often unaware of the implications of UNESCO recognition, expecting financial support or tourism benefits that do not materialise.
- Some communities resist shared heritage classifications, preferring exclusive national ownership.
- Issues in fieldwork methodologies:
  - Leading questions in research often result in the artificial confirmation of traditions that may not exist as they are presented, reflecting a form of researcher bias or confirmation bias in data collection.
  - Some "reconstructed" traditions are found classified as "authentic" without full community consent. The dominance of the preservationist agenda ultimately favours the imposition of certain views on the past and identity, which many researchers and communities would not endorse.
  - Some researchers admit they are under pressure to shape traditions to fit institutional expectations rather than representing lived cultural practices. This can be addressed by extending the principles of academic autonomy to cultural institutions, for which we also provide a specific recommendation.

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2. Key Issues and Structural Weaknesses

2.1. The Disconnect Between Policy and Research

- Serbia lacks a coherent long-term strategy for ICH safeguarding, leading to reactive rather than proactive measures. This could be avoided by drafting a strategy and a corresponding action plan, which would be based on the new Cultural Heritage Law— the first in history to regulate the issue of ICH (which is also addressed in a separate recommendation).
- Most of the academic studies and fieldwork findings are not incorporated into government policy, creating a disconnect between research and implementation. This is part of a broader issue of policy-making based on myths and short-term political needs rather than research—a persistent trend that shows no sign of weakening. In this context, the recommendation would be to integrate Serbian humanities into the system of research oriented toward development and innovation, which significantly helps prevent isolationism.
- Institutions focus on "checkbox" projects to secure funding, rather than addressing the long-term sustainability of heritage.

2.2. The Lack of Multidisciplinary Approaches

- ICH is often examined through an ethnological lens, with little input from archaeologists, musicologists, linguists, and other specialists.
- The separation between material and intangible heritage prevents a holistic approach to cultural preservation.
- There is a lack of grant calls with guidelines that require interdisciplinary and integrated research and safeguarding of both intangible and tangible heritage. Were such an approach to exist, it would help prevent the artificial separation of disciplines and the fragmentation of research topics.

2.3. UNESCO and the Geopolitics of Heritage Safeguarding

- Serbia has lagged behind neighbouring countries like Croatia and Slovenia in securing UNESCO recognitions, leading to a competitive rather than cooperative approach. In line with this, the idea briefly outlined here is further developed in the following recommendations—it is essential to issue regular grant calls for the research and safeguarding of shared elements of ICH, thereby programmatically emphasising the regional and reconciliatory aspects of heritage.
- Many participants criticised UNESCO's framework, which is considered by some rigid, failing to account for the complex, multi-ethnic nature of Balkan heritage. However, it is important to bear in mind that rigidity serves as a safeguard against voluntarism. Therefore, it is beneficial to maintain elements of expert evaluation throughout the process of opening the system to multiple voices.

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3. Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

3.1. Institutional Reforms

- Decentralisation of ICH safeguarding to include regional museums, local heritage organisations, and community groups.
- A more transparent selection process for heritage nominations, reducing the influence of a small group of experts.
- Greater government funding for long-term heritage research and preservation efforts, rather than focusing solely on UNESCO recognitions. This is, however, risky—UNESCO serves as a sort of guarantor that appropriation will not occur, even though serious research indicates that it is already happening. However, the principle of minimising harm is key here, given that our research has confirmed the assumption that the UNESCO system, as the only existing control mechanism, reduces the likelihood of misuse. The issue is linked to what is arguably the most important question of overall policy in the Balkans—respect for minority rights, with the aim of preventing future identity-based conflicts.

3.2. Encouraging Multidisciplinary Collaboration

- Greater integration of archaeology, musicology, and linguistics into ICH research and documentation.
- More inclusive research frameworks that allow for cross-disciplinary approaches.

3.3. Reducing Political and Nationalist Influence

- Encouraging joint UNESCO nominations with neighbouring countries to reduce geopolitical tensions.
- Reframing heritage discussions to focus on cooperation, rather than national ownership conflicts.
- Educating media and policymakers on the importance of ICH beyond nationalist narratives.

3.4. Strengthening Community Involvement

- Providing training programmes for local communities to understand UNESCO processes and heritage safeguarding mechanisms.
- Developing participatory models where communities can define their own heritage priorities without conforming to nationalism or religious fundamentalism.
- Offering direct financial support for endangered cultural practices.

3.5. Addressing Research Gaps

- Longitudinal studies on ICH sustainability, tracking how traditions evolve over time.
- Targeted funding for underrepresented traditions, especially those practised by minority communities.

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Conclusions: A Crossroads for Serbia's ICH Policy

What the Focus Groups Revealed

The discussions highlighted certain systemic flaws in Serbia's approach to ICH safeguarding but also provided insightful recommendations for reform. The key conclusions are:

- ICH safeguarding in Serbia is over-centralised, making it difficult for diverse voices to be heard.
- Heritage has been instrumentalised for political and national identity-building, rather than approached as a shared cultural phenomenon.
- The academic and practical aspects of ICH safeguarding are disconnected, preventing effective heritage management.
- Communities remain largely uninformed about UNESCO's role, leading to misconceptions about recognition and financial benefits.
- Humanities students are not systematically prepared for jobs in the cultural heritage safeguarding system

What Needs to Change?

- Serbia's ICH safeguarding system lacks a safeguarding component, and needs a paradigm shift, moving away from political and bureaucratic control toward a more participatory, interdisciplinary approach.
- Joint nominations and international cooperation could help defuse cultural heritage conflicts and promote regional reconciliation.
- A long-term heritage strategy must be developed, rather than relying on ad-hoc listings and short-term projects.
- University curricula in humanities and in some social sciences should include more programmes that prepare students for applied science and policy support; they should be diversified and strengthened (although in recent years there have been programmes that change the way of looking at what humanities scholars actually do)

Broader Implications

- The Balkan region as a whole faces similar heritage ownership disputes, suggesting that a transnational policy approach could be beneficial.
- The UNESCO framework may not be fully suited to complex, multi-ethnic cultural landscapes, requiring adaptation to regional realities.

Final Thoughts

Serbia's current ICH system is at a crossroads. It can either continue to function as a tool for national identity-building and geopolitical competition, or it can evolve into a more inclusive, reconciliation-oriented, community-driven, and sustainable model of heritage safeguarding based on academic and applied research and not on myths or day-to-day politics. Based on this analysis, recommendations are offered below.

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Recommendations for Sustainable Management of ICH in Serbia and the Region

Based on the focus group discussions, the following recommendations are proposed for
- **Serbian institutions and**
- **UNESCO and other international organisations working in the region.**

Recommendations for Serbian Institutions

Institutional and Policy Reforms

1. Decentralise ICH governance by transferring authority to a network of regional museums, universities, institutes and cultural organisations, ensuring broader participation and the legitimacy of the system.
2. Establish a fully independent National ICH Committee composed of experts from various disciplines, cultural practitioners, and community representatives, proposed by various groups of stakeholders and elected by the Parliament (not as an advisory body within the ministry), ensuring diverse perspectives in decision-making.
3. Develop a clear, long-term National Strategy for ICH Safeguarding, aligning national policies with the real needs of communities, rather than focusing solely on UNESCO recognition.
4. Streamline and simplify the process for registering ICH elements in the National Register to allow greater participation from grassroots cultural practitioners and local organisations, without compromising expertise.

Strengthening Funding and Sustainability Mechanisms

5. Increase government funding for long-term research leading to knowledge-based safeguarding rather than one-off projects linked to particular UNESCO nominations.
6. Create a specialised grant program for endangered ICH elements, ensuring sustainability beyond symbolic recognition.
7. Provide financial incentives and tax benefits for businesses, NGOs, endowments etc., to boost investment in the sector leading to broader representation in the preservation and transmission of ICH practices (e.g., traditional craftsmanship, music, and festivals).

Enhancing Community Participation and Public Awareness

8. Implement community-led heritage workshops in collaboration with regional museums and prominent NGOs, allowing local practitioners to define their own heritage priorities.
9. Increase public education efforts through schools and cultural programmes to raise awareness of the importance of ICH beyond nationalist narratives.
10. Introduce participatory budgeting processes, where local communities can decide on funding allocation for cultural heritage projects.

Reducing Political and Nationalist Influence on ICH

11. Shift heritage policy away from identity politics by promoting ICH as a tool for cultural exchange and cooperation, rather than an element of geopolitical competition, nationalist exclusivism and religious fundamentalism potentially leading to extremism and identity-based conflicts.

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12. Promote joint UNESCO nominations for shared heritage elements with neighbouring countries to reduce tensions over cultural claims–there is robust scholarship, and several research teams, including the SICHWEB team, who have already developed such a model.

13. Establish a neutral advisory body (independent from political pressures) to assess heritage nominations and prevent exclusive ethnic framings of shared traditions. This could be either the existing National committee that should be transformed into an independent agency or a newly created committee excluded from the portfolio of the Ministry of Culture and elected in line with standards already used in Serbia for independent bodies.

Research, Documentation, and Interdisciplinary Approaches

14. Strengthen interdisciplinary research by integrating ethnology, musicology, archaeology, linguistics, and folklore studies into ICH documentation and analysis through projects and curricula (specialist, Master's and PhD studies, including modules or focused short cycle programmes on particular aspects or communities).

15. Invest in the development of a digital national archive for ICH, where researchers and practitioners can contribute multimedia documentation of heritage practices in open-access formats.

16. Conduct long-term impact studies to assess how UNESCO recognition affects the sustainability of cultural practices, identify risks of commodification or distortion, and make this monitoring a standard practice.

Recommendations for UNESCO and International Organisations Working in the Region

Adapting UNESCO Policies to the Specificities of the Western Balkans

1. Recognise that ICH in the Balkans more generally is deeply intertwined with ethnic, religious, and national identity, requiring more flexible nomination procedures that support transnational heritage recognition, not tied solely to the national level (for instance, by opening the possibility of the regional register).

2. Revise UNESCO's territorial principle for heritage safeguarding, allowing diaspora communities and minority groups to be more actively involved in nominations.

3. Encourage cross-border ICH nominations by establishing regional heritage councils, where countries can negotiate joint applications rather than competing for exclusive recognition.

Strengthening Support for Local Communities

4. Shift focus from top-down heritage management to community-based safeguarding, where UNESCO directly supports local cultural initiatives and practitioners.

5. Develop regional training programs to teach local communities and heritage practitioners about the practical benefits and challenges of UNESCO recognition.

6. Establish a small-grants programme for community-led heritage projects, ensuring that funding reaches grassroots heritage practitioners.

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Reducing Geopolitical Tensions and Fostering Regional Cooperation

7. Create a Balkan ICH Mediation Platform, where experts from multiple countries can negotiate heritage claims before they escalate into political disputes.

8. Promote UNESCO heritage as a tool for reconciliation, ensuring that ICH is presented as a shared legacy rather than a marker of ethnic or national divisions.

9. Encourage bilateral and multilateral agreements for heritage cooperation, particularly for contested elements (for instance gusle singing, Krivo kolo, and Ojkača singing).

Increasing Transparency and Oversight in the ICH Nomination Process

10. Ensure greater transparency in the selection process by requiring that UNESCO-nominated heritage elements include input from multiple disciplines and local communities, without compromising the effectiveness of the procedures.

11. Conduct external reviews of state heritage nominations, ensuring they are not shaped by nationalist and fundamentalist agendas but by genuine cultural representation and academic knowledge.

12. Establish an international observer body to assess potential conflicts over ICH nominations, preventing heritage disputes before they become diplomatic issues

Digital Innovation and New Methods for ICH Preservation

13. Invest in digital heritage preservation, ensuring that endangered ICH elements are documented and made accessible to a wider global audience.

14. Promote the use of virtual and augmented reality to allow younger generations to engage with ICH in new ways, ensuring continuity.

15. Support the translation and digitisation of ICH research into multiple languages, ensuring that local heritage studies reach international audiences.

Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive and Sustainable ICH Safeguarding Framework

By implementing these recommendations, Serbia and the broader region can move beyond the current limitations of ICH safeguarding, addressing the political, institutional, and practical barriers that have hindered effective heritage management.

For Serbian institutions, the key priorities should be decentralisation, increased community engagement, and the reduction of nationalist influences on ICH policy.

For UNESCO and international organisations, the focus should be on adapting global policies to the realities of the Balkans, fostering cross-border cooperation, and ensuring that local communities play a greater role in heritage management.

This approach would transform ICH from a source of cultural competition into a platform for regional collaboration and sustainable preservation.