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

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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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D7.5.7 | *Analysis and Conclusion on Cultural Heritage Debates in Montenegro*

Several consistent themes, issues, and conclusions emerge from the review of the focus groups from Montenegro:
- the politicisation of heritage coupled with identity tensions,
- institutional inefficiencies,
- tourism-driven challenges, and

There is the need for a more inclusive and depoliticised approach to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection.

1. Key Themes Across All Focus Groups

1.1. Cultural Heritage as a Political and Identity Battleground
- ICH is frequently contested between national and ethnic groups, especially in multi-ethnic parts of the country.
- Montenegrin identity politics influences heritage recognition, with debates over whether heritage "belongs to" the state or ethnic groups.
- Political actors manipulate heritage recognition for nationalist purposes, often ignoring historical and multicultural dimensions.

1.2. Institutional and Bureaucratic Failures in Heritage Protection
- Montenegro's ICH safeguarding system operates through a centralised framework, with decision-making concentrated in Cetinje (the historic royal capital, now the seat of the Ministry of Culture and the Administration for Protection of Cultural Property), which contributes to the perception of, if not marginalizing, then sidelining local communities.
- UNESCO nominations take years due to bureaucratic delays and lack of clear procedures.
- Local museums and grassroots organisations compensate for state inefficiencies, often taking heritage protection into their own hands without adequate support.

1.3. The Role of Tourism: Economic Gain vs. Cultural Erosion
- Tourism presents an economic opportunity while also raising considerations about the balance between commercialization and heritage preservation:
  - By definition, "authenticity" is excluded from UNESCO's definition of ICH, which views heritage as dynamic, a continuous construct that is 'lived.' This gap in the interpretation of heritage as authentic/constructed forms the basis of many disputes, especially when it comes to ethnically attributed heritage.
  - Key sites have been over-commercialised. Cultural spaces are repurposed for tourism, erasing historical narratives to cater to market demands.
  - Local businesses fail to capitalise on local heritage, as tourist souvenirs often feature Turkish, Italian, or Pan-Slavic motifs instead.
- Sustainable heritage tourism models are largely absent, leading to the loss of cultural uniqueness, as perceived by local communities.

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1.4. Generational Disconnect and Weak Heritage Education

- Youth engagement with local traditions varies, highlighting opportunities for expanded cultural education and outreach initiatives.
- Heritage education is insufficient in Montenegro's school curriculum, with regional and ethnic histories often ignored or simplified.
- Digital culture (TikTok, Instagram) is reshaping youth engagement with heritage, but heritage institutions fail to use these platforms effectively.

1.5. Community-Driven Heritage Protection vs. State Control

- Local heritage activists and NGOs are found to be more effective than state institutions in raising awareness, which makes them an asset for peace and development programs than include heritage and identity management.
- Grassroots movements tend to play a crucial role in protecting cultural sites from commercial exploitation (e.g., the Sveti Stefan campaign), but this requires caution, as it has been established that these initiatives are prone to criticism toward state authorities, even when they are constrained by international conventions.
- State representatives admit they struggle to balance heritage protection with economic pressures, exposing failures in long-term planning that need expert assistance.

2. Major Issues and Policy Dilemmas

2.1. National vs. Local Ownership of Heritage

- Should heritage belong to a nation, a region, or a specific ethnic/religious group?
  - Bokeška Mornarica: Is it Montenegrin, Croatian, or regional?
  - Gusle: Perhaps the key contested ICH element, as it plays a significant role in Serbian, Croatian, Bosniak, Montenegrin, and Albanian folk traditions on which nation-building myths are based.

2.2. Political Manipulation of Heritage is a Global Phenomenon

- Governments tend to use cultural heritage as a soft power tool, and prioritise nationalistic narratives over historical accuracy.
- UNESCO processes exacerbate tensions, as heritage safeguarding is treated as a geopolitical competition rather than a cooperative cultural effort it was initially intended to be.

2.3. The Balance Between Economic Development and Cultural Conservation

- Should Montenegro "sacrifice" heritage for tourism growth?
- How to regulate tourism commercialisation while preserving authentic cultural practices?
- Can zoning laws protect historical city centres from excessive commercial development?

2.4. The Generational Disconnect

- How can young people be engaged in ICH protection?
- Should heritage education be mandatory in Montenegrin schools?
- Can digital tools (augmented and virtual reality, social media) be used to revive interest in local traditions?

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2.5. The Role of International Institutions

- Should UNESCO frameworks be adapted to fit the complex identity politics of the Western Balkans (WB)?
- Can joint nominations between Montenegro and neighbouring countries help resolve disputes?
- Should Montenegro seek greater international oversight to depoliticise heritage protection?

Conclusion

A Deeply Fragmented Cultural Landscape

The focus groups highlight Montenegro's deep internal contradictions when it comes to heritage management, and especially ICH safeguarding. Local activists and communities push for greater recognition and perceive state institutions as ineffective, slow, or politically compromised. The gap between national and regional identities further complicates heritage recognition, with ethnic claims often overriding historical complexity. It appears there's a tension between ethnic identity and a professional approach, with the former prevailing.

The Risk of Losing Cultural Authenticity

- Without strategic intervention, Montenegro risks losing much of its cultural uniqueness due to over-tourism, commercial exploitation, and generational disengagement.
- Many traditions survive only because of community-led efforts, not because of government protection.
- Framing heritage primarily within national identity politics may overlook its potential as a platform for cultural exchange and regional cooperation.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

For Montenegro to protect and sustain its ICH effectively, it should strive for:

- Decentralisation of heritage management, giving regional institutions more autonomy.
- Depoliticisation of cultural heritage, promoting a shared, multi-ethnic approach rather than exclusive national claims.
- Creation of sustainable heritage tourism models, ensuring economic benefits without eroding cultural identity.
- Reform of heritage education, integrating local traditions into school curricula and digital platforms.
- Strengthening of local and international cooperation, seeking joint UNESCO nominations.

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Policy Recommendations for ICH Protection for Montenegrin and Serbian Institutions, and International Organisations

Based on the focus group discussions from Montenegro, this document outlines three sets of recommendations for:
- Montenegrin institutions, addressing their fragmented and politicised approach to heritage protection.
- Serbian institutions, concerning the safeguarding of Serbian cultural heritage in Montenegro.
- International organisations (UNESCO, EU, regional heritage networks), focusing on depoliticisation, cross-border cooperation, and sustainable heritage management.

Recommendations for Montenegrin Institutions

Reform Institutions and Policies

1. Decentralize ICH governance by creating officially recognized regional heritage councils that allow municipalities, local museums, and community organizations to participate in decision-making, rather than being confined to personal initiative, private contacts, and enthusiasm.

2. Establish an independent Heritage Council that includes experts, community representatives, and international observers to ensure transparent heritage nominations.

3. Develop a long-term National Strategy for ICH Safeguarding, aligning heritage policy with sustainable tourism, cultural education, and cross-border cooperation.

4. Simplify and clarify UNESCO nomination procedures, ensuring that applications are inclusive, evidence-based, and free from nationalist framing.

Reduce the Political and Ethnic Manipulation of Heritage

5. Shift ICH policy away from national identity-building, promoting heritage as a shared, cross-cultural asset rather than an ethnic possession.

6. Prohibit political interference in heritage protection through independent oversight boards, ensuring that nominations are evaluated based on historical and cultural value, not state narratives.

7. Encourage joint nominations with neighbouring countries, preventing diplomatic conflicts over shared traditions.

8. Strengthen legal protection for contested heritage sites, ensuring no ethnic or religious group can monopolise a shared cultural element.

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Strengthen Community Engagement and Education

9. Create participatory cultural inventories, where local communities document their own traditions and propose elements for protection.

10. Introduce heritage education into Montenegro's school curricula, incorporating regional history, folklore, traditional crafts etc.

11. Develop digital engagement programmes (e.g., interactive heritage apps, virtual museums, and social media campaigns) to connect young people with cultural traditions.

12. Establish annual grants for community-led ICH projects, prioritising grassroots safeguarding initiatives that promote heritage sustainability.

Regulate Tourism and Cultural Commercialisation

13. Develop a sustainable cultural tourism framework (based, for instance, on the existing Kotor strategy for cultural tourism as a model), ensuring that heritage sites are protected from over-commercialisation.

14. Introduce zoning laws to regulate business activities in historic areas, limiting the spread of foreign-themed souvenir shops and commercial developments.

15. Require tourism operators to undergo cultural certification, ensuring they accurately represent Montenegrin heritage.

Recommendations for Serbian Institutions (Safeguarding Serbian Heritage in Montenegro)

Strengthen Protection Mechanisms for Serbian Heritage in Montenegro

1. Create an academic-based, professional and independent Serbian Cultural Heritage Observatory to monitor the status of Serbian heritage sites and traditions in Montenegro, detached from daily political dynamics.

2. Provide financial and legal support to Serbian cultural organisations in Montenegro, ensuring that Serbian cultural elements are preserved and documented, and condition that assistance by depoliticization of activities.

3. Develop digital archives of Serbian heritage in Montenegro, collecting oral histories, documents, and audio-visual materials.

4. Establish a Cross-border Heritage Fund for joint heritage studies, nominations and management, ensuring that shared traditions are properly documented.

Diplomacy and Legal Advocacy

5. Use diplomatic channels to advocate for the protection of Serbian heritage in Montenegro, ensuring that Serbian cultural institutions are included in Montenegrin heritage discussions, in accordance with international law and agreements, without the risk of triggering interstate disputes.

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6. Encourage Serbian-Montenegrin bilateral agreements on cultural cooperation, particularly regarding UNESCO nominations and museum exchanges.

7. Engage with international organisations (UNESCO, Council of Europe) to ensure that Serbian heritage sites and traditions in Montenegro receive equal protection under Montenegrin law.

Educational and Cultural Initiatives

8. Promote Serbian language and culture through heritage workshops in Montenegro, supporting educational initiatives that teach Serbian history, folklore, and religious traditions.

9. Encourage Montenegrin schools to integrate Serbian cultural contributions into curricula, particularly in regions where Serbian heritage plays a significant role.

10. Support cross-border cultural programmes, including joint exhibitions, traditional music festivals, and academic conferences on shared history.

Safeguard Religious and Ethnic Heritage

11. Prevent religious heritage from being misclassified as solely Serbian or Montenegrin, but rather as joint, ensuring proper acknowledgment acceptable to stakeholders.

12. Considering its importance for identity-building and the recent politicization of identity based on ethnoreligious foundations, special attention should be given to the depoliticization of the ecclesiastical issue.

Recommendations for International Organisations (UNESCO, EU, Regional Cultural Networks)

Reform UNESCO and Regional Heritage Policies

1. Encourage transnational nominations for shared heritage elements, ensuring that cultural traditions are recognised across borders rather than within national frameworks.

2. Consider adapting UNESCO's territorial principle to reflect the multi-ethnic reality of the WB, allowing cross-border and diaspora communities to participate in ICH nominations.

3. Reflect on possibilities of creating Heritage Mediation Platform where Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia can resolve disputes over contested heritage elements before they escalate.

Strengthen Community-Centred Approaches

4. Increase direct funding for local heritage organizations, bypassing state institutions in the step of the procedure where the elements to be safeguarded are selected, to ensure community-led preservation efforts.

5. Support capacity-building programmes for Montenegrin and Serbian cultural institutions, training heritage professionals in sustainable preservation methods.

6. Launch a Regional Youth Heritage Programme, connecting young people from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia through joint heritage documentation projects.

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Prevent the Use of Heritage as a Political Tool

7. Monitor and report on the politicisation of cultural heritage in the Balkans, publishing regular assessments on how governments use ICH for nationalistic purposes.

8. Establish international review panels for contested heritage nominations, ensuring historical accuracy and professional approach, to prevent state-driven exclusivity.

Encourage Ethical and Sustainable Heritage Tourism

9. Develop EU- and CoE-backed cultural tourism guidelines, ensuring that heritage sites are protected from excessive commercialisation.

10. Promote ethical tourism labels for businesses that support local culture, ensuring that profits from heritage tourism benefit local communities.

Conclusion: A Call for Balanced, Inclusive, and Sustainable Heritage Protection

These recommendations aim to resolve tensions, improve institutional efficiency, and protect ICH from political manipulation.

- Montenegro is advised to decentralise its heritage system, depoliticise cultural recognition, and integrate heritage education into national curricula.
- Serbia is advised to work to safeguard Serbian heritage in Montenegro through diplomatic, financial, and cultural initiatives, according to international law.
- UNESCO and international organisations are advised to adapt their frameworks to the complex realities of the WB, promoting cooperation over competition.

If these steps are taken, heritage protection can become a tool for regional stability rather than a source of conflict.

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How to Overcome the Issue of Serbian Heritage Protection in Montenegro without Political Conflict?

The challenge lies in the clash between UNESCO's framework (which grants sole heritage authority to member states) and the cultural reality that Serbian heritage exists in Montenegro but is not always recognised or protected adequately from the standpoint of the community itself. From Montenegro's perspective, Serbia's involvement in safeguarding Serbian heritage in Montenegro can be framed as political interference or an attack on Montenegrin sovereignty. From Serbia's perspective, Montenegro's exclusive control over heritage can result in the neglect, reclassification, or erasure of Serbian cultural elements. To avoid perceived aggression or political disputes, a solution should shift the debate away from state-driven intervention and instead focus on community-led, internationalised, and depoliticised heritage protection in general, and ICH safeguarding in particular.

Practical Measures to Protect Serbian Heritage in Montenegro Without Political Conflict

To safeguard Serbian heritage in Montenegro without triggering accusations of political interference, the approach should be decentralised, community-led, and framed within existing international frameworks. Below are specific measures that Serbian institutions, Montenegrin stakeholders, and international organisations can take to ensure effective and conflict-free heritage protection.

1. Reframe the Debate: Shift from a State-to-State Issue to a Cultural Rights Approach
Why?
- Montenegrin institutions view direct involvement by the Serbian state in heritage protection as an infringement on Montenegro's sovereignty, reflecting broader concerns over external influence, particularly in the context of the ecclesiastical issue. However, heritage protection is also a matter of human rights, cultural diversity, and minority protection.

How to Reframe?
- Instead of Serbian state-to-state intervention, emphasise the cultural and linguistic rights of the Serbian community in Montenegro, while stressing respect for Montenegro's sovereignty.
- Work through Montenegrin-based Serbian organisations and independent NGOs rather than Serbian government bodies.

Practical Measures:
- Support local Serbian cultural NGOs in Montenegro, ensuring they take the lead in heritage protection rather than Serbian government ministries or agencies.
- Legally frame heritage protection as a minority rights issue under European legal frameworks (EU Minority Rights Protection, CoE Cultural Rights Charter).
- Engage international human rights groups that focus on cultural rights, ensuring that Serbian communities in Montenegro can preserve their traditions without state interference.

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- UN, NATO, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the World Bank, and other international organizations and institutions have well-established mechanisms for the protection of minorities that must not be overlooked if sustainable solutions are to be pursued.

2. Utilise Existing UNESCO and EU Multinational Heritage Mechanisms
Why?

As any other member-state, Montenegro controls UNESCO heritage nominations within its borders. However, multinational nominations and regional frameworks prevent unilateral control over shared heritage.

Practical Measures:

- Encourage joint Serbian-Montenegrin heritage nominations under UNESCO's multinational approach, by helping the Serbian community and organisations and Montenegrin institutions to collaborate.
- How?
  - Engage Montenegrin cultural stakeholders (professors, researchers, NGOs, museums) to support nominations.
  - Provide funding through independent cultural bodies instead of direct Serbian government funding.

Use EU heritage programmes instead of Serbian state funding:

- Montenegro is a member of EU culture funding programmes:
  - Creative Europe (supports cross-border cultural projects).
  - European Heritage Label (for sites of historical importance across multiple countries).
  - CoE Cultural Routes (Montenegro is already part of some networks).
- How?
  - Serbian heritage groups in Montenegro should apply directly for EU funding, avoiding state-level conflicts.
  - Serbian institutions should offer technical support, grant-writing expertise, and project guidance rather than direct funding.
  - Partner with neutral international heritage bodies (ICOMOS, Europa Nostra) to facilitate the process.

3. Strengthen Community-Based Cultural Documentation and Archiving
Why?

If Serbian heritage in Montenegro is well-documented and archived within independent institutions, it becomes less likely to be prone to oblivion, neglect, erasure, or reframing.

Practical Measures:

1. Launch a digital archive of Serbian heritage in Montenegro
   - Use non-governmental Serbian cultural centres to document oral histories, music, and traditions.
   - Partner with neutral international academic institutions (e.g., Balkan or East European or Mediterranean Studies centres in European universities).
   - Archive should be multi-lingual to ensure accessibility.

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2. Create a Montenegrin-Serbian Heritage Database

3. Develop an online platform showcasing Serbian cultural elements in Montenegro, hosted by an independent foundation rather than Serbian state bodies.

4. Digitally map churches, traditions, and historical sites using AI and 3D reconstruction under the Digital humanities/Smart Specialization framework supported by the World Bank in Serbia.

5. Develop a Serbian-Montenegrin Oral History Project

   • Collect testimonies from Serbian and Montenegrin community members, ensuring that historical narratives include diverse perspectives.

4. Promote Cultural Exchange Instead of Diplomatic Pressure
Why?

If heritage is framed as a matter of a diplomatic conflict, Montenegro is likely to resist any Serbian involvement. Instead, cultural exchange reduces tensions and fosters cooperation.

Practical Measures:

1. Organise joint Serbian-Montenegrin cultural festivals

   • Festivals that focus on shared traditions rather than national identity prevent political manipulation.

   • Themes could include traditional music, poetry, and crafts (e.g., a Gusle storytelling festival).

2. Create a Montenegrin-Serbian Cultural Youth Exchange Programme

   • Young people from Serbia and Montenegro should collaborate on heritage projects.

   • Exchange programmes with EU funding (e.g., Erasmus+ Culture) should be used instead of bilateral agreements to avoid party-lead political resistance.

3. Encourage twinning partnerships between Montenegrin and Serbian museums

   • Example: Museums could share research and exhibits.

   • EU cultural grants should be used to fund cross-border exhibitions rather than Serbian state funding.

5. Engage International Institutions to Mediate Heritage Recognition
Why?

If Serbia's role in heritage protection is framed as international cooperation rather than bilateral pressure, Montenegro will find it easier to accept participation.

Practical Measures:

1. Use UNESCO and CoE mediation for heritage disputes

   • Request independent UNESCO heritage experts to assess Serbian heritage elements in Montenegro.

   • Propose the establishment of a regional ICH advisory panel involving Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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2. Encourage international research collaborations

- Partner with global academic institutions to provide ethnically unbiased heritage research, preventing unilateral national interpretations.
- Ensure research is published in English and available internationally, limiting nationalist re-framing.

3. Seek third-party mediation for sensitive heritage disputes

- Use international ethnically neutral heritage organisations (ICOMOS, Europa Nostra) to mediate Montenegrin-Serbian heritage disagreements for heritage based disputes (to be reviewed by a European heritage panel instead of being handled at a state level).

Conclusion: A New Heritage Diplomacy for the Balkans

Instead of engaging in direct political confrontation, Serbia can help protect Serbian heritage in Montenegro through local, regional, and international initiatives.

- By shifting from state-driven intervention to cultural rights and community-driven approaches, more acceptable to institutions.
- Joint international projects and EU-backed programmes will ensure sustainable protection without political escalation.
- The future of Serbian heritage in Montenegro depends on depoliticisation, strategic internationalisation, and grassroots empowerment.