

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.

D7.5.8 | Overall Impressions from the Focus Group Discussions on Intangible Cultural Heritage in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

The focus group discussions Republic Srpska and interviews from in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) highlight several crucial themes and challenges in the protection, safeguarding, promotion, and institutional management of Serbian intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The key findings are categorised into thematic areas:

1. Institutional and Structural Issues in ICH Protection

Fragmentation of Institutional Responsibilities

- The division of cultural governance between RS and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) complicates heritage management.
- The Museum of the Republic of Srpska acts as the de facto central institution for ICH protection but lacks formal authority over broader heritage policies, which fall under the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Ministry, however, does not seek to interfere with ICH matters (a potential opportunity as well as a challenge, as we'll see).
- In the Republic of Srpska, there is no specific commission for this matter, but the Museum of the Republic of Srpska is the central institution overseeing the Center for ICH. Proposals are submitted to this center, which then forwards them to the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Srpska. The process is then automatically continued by sending the proposals to the Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO within the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Although this state-level Commission for UNESCO cooperation is perceived as politically influenced, elements of ICH smoothly alternate (one from the RS, one from the Federation, and so on) in their candidacies for UNESCO, which represents a positive aspect of the fragmentation.

Absence of Higher Education Programmes in Ethnology and Anthropology

- Unlike Serbia, BiH does not have dedicated ethnology or anthropology university curricula, which results in an insufficient number of qualified experts for ICH research and documentation.
- The existing professionals come from geography, philology, ethnomusicology or history backgrounds, leading to a weaker academic presence in cultural heritage studies tied to ethnology, anthropology, archaeology or cultural management (or are trained in Zagreb, Coratia, and Belgrade, Serbia).

Bureaucratic and Political Barriers to International Recognition

- The process of nominating ICH elements for UNESCO recognition is moderately politicised.
- Ethnically attributed ICH elements, important for communities, faced opposition from representatives coming from “rival” nations before the alternating model was introduced which is an evident progress in administrative terms.

2. Financial and Resource Limitations

Lack of State and Municipal Financial Support

- ICH safeguarding is primarily funded small-scale institutional budgets thanks to personal initiative.
- Cultural associations (e.g., minority associations, and folk ensembles) struggle with securing funds for research, performances, and conservation.
- Municipalities provide only limited funding.
- Ministry of Civil Affairs does not prioritise ICH financial support.
- Funds are also provided by the entity ministries of culture.
- The main issue is the absence of strategies and policies for research and safeguarding at all levels of government.
- Research efforts and funding depend on the personal commitment of those involved.

Dependence on External and Private Support

- Successful projects like Zmijanski vez (Zmijanje embroidery), introduced through private sponsorships, regional cooperation, and NGO funding, later gained official support thanks to the media hype and UNESCO's appeal.
- Economic incentives are needed to transform ICH into a sustainable practice, such as linking cultural heritage to tourism and creative industries.

3. National Identity and Political Influence on ICH

Heritage as a Tool for National Representation

- The safeguarding and promotion of Serbian ICH in RS is closely linked to national identity-building.
- There is a strong desire to use UNESCO recognition to showcase Serbian heritage at an international level, as seen in exhibitions in Brussels, Moscow, and Paris.
- ICH is perceived as one of the few non-political ways to improve RS's international visibility.

Ethnopolitical Tensions and Cultural Marginalisation

- There is a perception that Bosniak institutions push a mono-ethnic interpretation of Bosnian culture, sidelining Serbian and Croatian contributions.
- Efforts to collaborate with institutions from the FBiH (e.g., the National Museum in Sarajevo) are blocked by political considerations rather than academic or cultural concerns.
- Contrary to general perception, Serbian cultural heritage is not systematically underrepresented in Bosnian state-level heritage protection. The ICH list of Bosnia and Herzegovina includes more elements from the Republic of Srpska, and Serbian heritage is not neglected. The Federation does not expand its list, while well-prepared dossiers from the Republic of Srpska find their way to UNESCO more easily.
- It is precisely through ICH safeguarding that Serbian heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina receives its full affirmation, and it can be stated that this sector serves as an excellent example for other institutions.

4. Heritage Popularisation, Economic Potential, and International Cooperation

Expansion of Heritage Awareness among the Public

- ICH is still not widely understood by the general public, and awareness campaigns are needed.
- There is a need for digital documentation and educational programmes to ensure that younger generations engage with heritage.
- Schools have started integrating traditional crafts into the curriculum, but these efforts are still fragmented, and distant from what is generally perceived as modern and development-oriented, thus leaving ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) in the domain of the historical, folkloric, and rural.

Connection of ICH to Economic Development

- Some ICH elements such as Zmijanski vez have been successfully integrated into modern fashion and design, showing economic potential.
- Traditional knowledge and crafts need stronger integration into the local economy through subsidies for artisans and heritage-based tourism.
- Entrepreneurial efforts, such as branding Banja Luka ćevap and the Banja Luka kolo, show potential but require more systematic support.

Necessity for Strengthened Regional and International Cooperation

- Collaboration with Serbian institutions (e.g., The Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade) has been beneficial but remains underdeveloped.
- RS professionals feel that Serbian institutions do not fully understand their challenges (e.g., lack of academic programmes, financial constraints, and political barriers in Bosnia).
- There is growing interest in joint nominations for UNESCO recognition, but this remains hindered by political disagreements at the Bosnian state level.

5. Opportunities for Strategic Action

Depoliticisation of ICH Protection

- Experts suggest that ICH should be framed as a regional and community-driven initiative, not as an ethno-nationalist project.
- There is a need to promote ICH as a cultural asset rather than a political statement, emphasising its role in economic and social development.

Reinforcement of Institutional and Research Capacities

- The development of ICH studies within RS's university system is a critical priority.
- The expansion of cooperation with Serbian institutions could help address academic gaps in ethnology and anthropology.

Improvement of Financial and Structural Support

- ICH associations and cultural organisations need more financial backing from both local and international sources.
- There is an opportunity to apply for EU cultural grants (e.g., Creative Europe, Horizon Europe), which require non-political, collaborative projects.

Conclusion: Balancing Cultural Protection with Regional Realities

The focus groups highlight a deep connection between ICH safeguarding and national identity-building in Republika Srpska, but also numerous practical obstacles:

- Institutional fragmentation and the lack of formal heritage governance create structural barriers.
- Political tensions within BiH were not found to hinder UNESCO nominations and state-level support for Serbian cultural elements - during the research, it was not found that daily politics directly influences the work of professionals in the protection system.
- Funding shortages limit the research, promotion, and economic utilisation of ICH
- Collaboration with Serbian institutions is not yet at a satisfactory level, requiring better alignment and mutual understanding.
- Heritage professionals lack support to expand community participation and economic opportunities related to ICH.

Recommendations and a funding strategy for the protection of Serbian intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Republika Srpska based on the focus group findings.

The strategy aims to address institutional weaknesses, depoliticize heritage management, and ensure long-term sustainability.

Recommendations for Republika Srpska's Institutions and Cultural Stakeholders

Strengthening Institutional and Policy Frameworks

1. Create a Centralized Heritage Protection Body

- Establish a Republika Srpska Commission for ICH to coordinate heritage nominations, research funding, and policy implementation while coordinating efforts with the Commission at the federal and entity level as to prepare adequate proposals for UNESCO list nominations.
- Ensure that the Muzej Republike Srpske has an even more official role in ICH governance, bridging the gap between academic research and state institutions.

2. Develop an ICH Protection Strategy Aligned with International Standards

- Draft a long-term action plan for ICH protection that aligns with UNESCO's 2003 Convention and the Council of Europe's Cultural Heritage Guidelines.
- Improve cooperation between Republika Srpska and Serbia, ensuring that heritage projects receive regional and international visibility.

3. Expand Research and Higher Education Programs on ICH

- Introduce ICH-focused programs at universities in Banja Luka and East Sarajevo to train future experts in ethnology, folklore, and cultural anthropology.
- Develop joint research projects with Serbian universities and European academic institutions to fill knowledge gaps.

Addressing Political Barriers and Strengthening Heritage Advocacy

4. Depoliticize Heritage Protection and Frame ICH as a Cultural Asset

- Position ICH as a tool for economic and social development, rather than a national identity marker.
- Use cultural diplomacy and academic exchange programs to create a neutral space for ICH dialogue within Bosnia and Herzegovina. This sensitive issue must be approached with caution. Culture falls under the jurisdiction of the entities, and dialogue within the country—or between the entities—does not come easily. At times, it is seen as undermining the entities' authority, which is something no one in Bosnia and Herzegovina wants, as it could threaten the already fragile stability.

5. Improve Representation of Serbian ICH in FBiH

- Advocate for equal representation of Serbian cultural heritage in cultural institutions in Federation and Boasniak, Croatian and minority heritage inculturla institutions in Republika Srpska.
- Establish bilateral agreements between Republika Srpska and Serbian cultural institutions to protect elements that may not receive recognition at the FBiH level but may be safeguarded through multi-state nomination.

Expanding Public Engagement and Heritage Education

6. Increase Awareness of ICH Through Public Education

- Integrate ICH studies into school curricula, ensuring that younger generations learn about traditional crafts, music, and oral traditions.
- Develop multimedia campaigns, documentaries, and digital storytelling initiatives to engage broader audiences.

7. Encourage Community-Led Heritage Preservation

- Establish local cultural hubs in municipalities to support grassroots heritage projects.
- Provide funding and logistical support for folk ensembles, craftspeople, and oral historians.

Enhancing Financial Support and Sustainability

8. Secure Long-Term Funding for ICH Protection

- Increase public funding for heritage research and conservation, ensuring that municipalities support ICH practitioners.
- Apply for EU cultural grants (Creative Europe, Horizon Europe) to expand funding opportunities beyond domestic budgets.

9. Encourage Private Sector and Cultural Tourism Investment

- Develop cultural tourism models that integrate ICH into local economies, such as heritage craft fairs, guided tours, and music festivals.
- Provide tax incentives and business grants for entrepreneurs integrating ICH into the creative economy.

Funding Strategy for ICH Protection in Republika Srpska

Funding Priorities

- Support for Academic Research and Higher Education Expansion
 - Fund the creation of ICH-focused university programs and research projects on endangered traditions.
- Community-Based Heritage Protection Initiatives
 - Provide direct grants to local organizations, KUDs, and craft collectives preserving traditional knowledge.

- Digitization and Public Outreach
 - Invest in digital tools, online archives, and interactive heritage platforms to make ICH more accessible.
- Cultural Tourism and Economic Sustainability
 - Support cultural heritage businesses, ensuring ICH contributes to economic development.

Funding Mechanisms and Allocation

- Competitive Grant System
 - Establish a heritage funding program that supports academic research, community projects, and cross-border collaboration.
- Multi-Year Funding Cycles
 - Prioritize long-term projects over short-term initiatives, ensuring sustained impact.
- EU and International Co-Financing
 - Encourage Republika Srpska's institutions to apply for European and UNESCO funding, reducing reliance on state budgets.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Create an ICH Advisory Board
 - Ensure that all funded projects undergo independent evaluation to assess their impact.
- Develop Performance Metrics for Funded Initiatives
 - Track public engagement levels, academic outputs, and economic contributions of ICH initiatives.

Conclusion: A Balanced and Sustainable Approach

By implementing these recommendations and funding strategies, Republika Srpska can strengthen its ICH protection framework, enhance international recognition, and ensure long-term sustainability.

Serbian Heritage in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings from the Focus Group Analysis.

The review of the focus group transcripts from Republika Srpska does not prominently mention Serbian intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). However, several points suggest underlying challenges and potential marginalization of Serbian heritage outside of RS, particularly in the broader Bosnian cultural policy framework.

Indirect References to Serbian Heritage in the Federation of BiH

Although the transcripts primarily focus on ICH issues within Republika Srpska, some points hint at the absence or difficulties of Serbian cultural representation in FBiH and absence of representation of non-Serbian heritage in RS), such as:

Political and Institutional Barriers to Serbian Heritage Recognition in FBiH

- UNESCO nomination processes in Bosnia are perceived as biased, limiting international recognition.
- The state-level Commission for UNESCO in Sarajevo is viewed as resistant to recognizing Serbian cultural elements from FBiH and non-Serbian in RS.
- Some participants criticize the erasure or rebranding of medieval Serbian cultural landmarks in favor of a dominant “Bosnian” identity.

Lack of Institutional Support for Serbian Cultural Activities in FBiH

- Unlike in Republika Srpska, where Serbian cultural institutions are formally recognized and funded, in FBiH, Serbian cultural organizations often operate without formal institutional backing. Similarly, Bosniak and Croatian institutions do not have formal status in the Republic of Srpska.
- There is a widespread perception that funding from state-level cultural institutions in Bosnia tends to prioritize Bosniak and multiethnic projects, often leaving other initiatives underfunded or excluded.

Stećci as a Disputed Cultural Symbol

- Stećci (medieval tombstones) are an example of heritage claimed by multiple ethnic groups, including Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs.
- The focus group discussions mention that some Bosnian academic circles seek to remove Serbian Orthodox historical interpretations of stećci, despite evidence of Serbian inscriptions and Orthodox iconography.
- Ethnic attribution of heritage remains an issue, even when there are serial (multistate) nominations like this one.

Why Serbian ICH in FBiH is Absent from the Discussions?

The transcripts do not explicitly discuss Serbian ICH in FBiH, likely due to several reasons:

- Political sensitivity:
 - Discussing Serbian heritage in FBiH risks escalating nationalist tensions, especially if it is framed as a challenge to Bosnian state identity.
- Lack of active institutional presence:
 - Serbian cultural organizations in FBiH lack state support, making it difficult to conduct systematic heritage research and promotion.
- Focus group participants’ backgrounds:
 - The discussions were dominated by experts from Republika Srpska, where Serbian heritage is institutionally supported, potentially leading to a lack of awareness or engagement with Serbian heritage in FBiH.

Policy and Funding Recommendations for Addressing Serbian Heritage in FBiH

Given these findings, it is essential to develop a strategic approach to support and protect Serbian ICH in FBiH without escalating political tensions. The recommendations include:

Policy Recommendations

Encourage Joint Heritage Recognition with Bosniak and Croat Communities

- Instead of framing heritage protection as an ethno-national project, it should be positioned as a regional and multicultural initiative.
- Example: Joint academic studies on shared ICH, such as medieval stećci, oral traditions, and religious festivals. Further research in this regard should determine whether the division of responsibilities prevents collaboration or perhaps facilitates it. Specifically, education is under the authority of the entities, but does this prevent the creation of a joint curriculum on crucial issues?

Strengthen Local Serbian Cultural Organizations in FBiH

- Provide financial and logistical support for Serbian heritage NGOs operating in Sarajevo, Mostar, and Tuzla.
- Ensure representation in Bosnia's cultural policy forums to advocate for equal recognition of Serbian heritage.

Document and Digitally Archive Serbian Heritage in FBiH

- Since physical conservation may face obstacles, a digital Serbian Heritage Archive of FBiH should be created.
- This ensures historical records, oral traditions, and folklore are preserved even if on-the-ground initiatives are blocked.

Develop Cultural Tourism Initiatives for Shared Heritage Sites

- Integrate Serbian heritage sites in FBiH into Bosnia's official tourism circuits, reinforcing their status as Bosnian rather than exclusively Serbian sites.
- Example: Promoting medieval Serbian monasteries as part of Bosnia's diverse historical landscape rather than ethnic enclaves.

Funding Strategy for Serbian ICH in FBiH

Since funding in FBiH may not prioritize Serbian ICH, alternative financial strategies are needed:

Channelling Serbian Academic Grants Through Academic Institutions in FBiH

- Serbian funders should support university-led projects in FBiH, ensuring legitimacy. Currently, they are limited exclusively to Serbian scientific institutions.
- Partner with neutral institutions (e.g., EU research grants, private cultural foundations) to avoid political backlash.

Encouraging Regional and EU Cultural Cooperation

- Apply for EU Creative Europe and Horizon Europe grants to secure international funding for Serbian heritage projects.
- Promote Serbian heritage in FBiH as part of Balkan cultural diversity, making it eligible for multinational heritage funds.

Establishing a Diaspora-Backed Serbian Heritage Fund for FBiH

- Serbian organizations in Austria, Germany, Switzerland etc. can support heritage management (including research) through private sponsorships and diaspora crowdfunding.
- Example: A Serbian Heritage Endowment that finances community-driven heritage initiatives in FBiH.

Using Cultural Events and Festivals as Economic Drivers

- Organize heritage festivals in Serbian communities in FBiH, generating both financial support and public awareness.
- Ensure that these festivals include Bosniak, Croat and minority participation, preventing exclusivist narratives.

Conclusion: A Cautious but Proactive Approach

While Serbian heritage in Republika Srpska is institutionally recognized, in FBiH it faces challenges of marginalization, lack of funding, and political barriers. Given that the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina alternate in proposing elements for UNESCO, it is highly unlikely that Serbian heritage within the Federation will ever be effectively promoted, due to well-established political and institutional reasons. Consequently, it is imperative to explore and establish sustainable alternatives for the preservation and promotion of this heritage.

To protect this heritage without reinforcing nationalist narratives, the strategy should:

- Promote shared heritage approaches rather than exclusive Serbian claims.
- Work through neutral institutions and international grants to avoid political pushback.
- Strengthen local Serbian cultural organizations without overt Serbian state involvement.
- Use tourism, education, and digitalization as non-political tools of heritage preservation.