

Intangible cultural heritage as a resource for 'self-stakeholderisation': fieldwork among politically active civil society stakeholders in the province of Vojvodina, Serbia

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Intangible cultural heritage as a resource for ‘self-stakeholderisation’: fieldwork among politically active civil society stakeholders in the province of Vojvodina, Serbia

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the effectiveness of stakeholder inclusion in preserving cultural values and identity, as embodied in intangible cultural heritage (ICH), without reigniting interethnic rivalries that contributed to war and social dismay in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Despite widespread fears, particularly among anthropology and critical heritage scholars, that ICH is counter-indicative and has the potential to exacerbate social conflicts rather than contribute to peace and reconciliation efforts in post-conflict regions, anthropological fieldwork in the province of Vojvodina, Serbia – a region with 32 recognised nationalities, ethnic and religious communities – yielded promising results for ICH enthusiasts. The context of our research is a reflection on possible solutions to a critical sociopolitical issue – improving the somewhat unsuccessful implementation of the international policy framework aimed at the instrumentalisation of ICH safeguarding for peace building and reconciliation in post-conflict regions, such as our

own (Western Balkans). During the fieldwork we observed a possibly unintended consequence of the implementation of the safeguarding protocols. Cultural entrepreneurship has been identified through the idiom of ‘self-stakeholderisation’ – a phenomenon of bottom-up agency by various actors who pursue developmental opportunities despite standard heritagisation practices dominated by cultural policies designed for the inclusion of stakeholders coming from dominant ethnic and religious populations. This research could serve as a starting point for the development of a comparatively applicable model of ICH stakeholder involvement in post-conflict societies, based on their self-stakeholderisation.

Keywords

identity politics, intercultural relations, south-eastern Europe, Vojvodina province, stakeholder inclusion, heritage management, post-conflict regions, UNESCO, anthropology

Introduction

The goal of our multi-year project is to contribute to a research-based solution to a critical sociopolitical issue: how to improve the somewhat unsuccessful implementation of the international policy framework aimed at the instrumentalisation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding for peace building and reconciliation in post-conflict regions. We investigated the feasibility of establishing a truly inclusive ICH register in Vojvodina, a province in northern Serbia and the state successor of former Yugoslavia (Ćuković and Milenković 2020).¹ As Grün (2009) explains it, Yugoslavia was a multinational federation with a tripartite system of national rights. The first category was composed of Yugoslavia's nations (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Muslims), which were separated into their 'home republics', with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was the home republic for three nations: Serbs, Croats and Muslims (now mostly referred to as Bosniaks). The second category encompassed Yugoslavia's nationalities (*narodnosti*), which had legal warranty to their own language and cultural assertion and had their 'home republic' outside Yugoslavia. In total, there were 10 such nationalities, including Albanians and Hungarians. The third category encompassed 'other nationalities and ethnic minorities' (Jewish people, Vlachs, Greeks and those who declared themselves as 'Yugoslavs') (Grün 2009, 6).

Vojvodina is a province located in northern Serbia, and it is known for its ethnic and cultural diversity. According to the 2011 census, Vojvodina is home to 32 ethnic groups, with Serbs being the largest group (66.76 per cent of the population), followed by Hungarians (13.28 per cent), Roma (2.47 per cent), Slovaks (2.21 per cent), Croats (2.10 per cent) and others. The province has a long history of multiculturalism, with different ethnic groups living together and influencing each other's cultures for centuries. For over two hundred years, Vojvodina was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which brought a diverse mix of cultures and traditions to the region. This legacy can still be seen in the architecture, food and customs of today. The region has also seen tensions between various groups in the past. However, there have been recent efforts to promote interethnic dialogue, tolerance and cooperation. Cultural festivals, language classes and youth exchanges are examples of initiatives that aim to promote understanding and respect among different ethnic groups. Given its ethnic and cultural

diversity, intercultural and inclusive heritage preservation policies are critical in Vojvodina. This means that heritage preservation efforts raise awareness among the general public about the needs and perspectives of all ethnic groups in the province, and they work to promote understanding and respect among different cultures. In this region, inclusive policies include involving representatives from various ethnic groups in heritage preservation decision-making processes, providing funding and resources for heritage preservation initiatives that reflect the region's diversity, and promoting cultural events and festivals that celebrate the various cultures. By doing so, heritage preservation efforts hope to foster pride and unity among the province's ethnic groups while also promoting social cohesion and intercultural understanding.

However, this representation, viewed through rose-coloured glasses, is far from universal. Different ethnic groups may view heritage preservation differently and prioritise different aspects of their cultural heritage. As a result, it is critical to engage in dialogue and collaboration with all stakeholders in heritage preservation efforts, as well as to strive for a balanced and inclusive approach that reflects the region's diversity. Not recognising a community as a legitimate stakeholder in the heritage preservation process can lead to a variety of problems. This lack of recognition can happen as a result of factors like political marginalisation, discrimination or a lack of resources or representation. In such cases, it is critical to advocate for the inclusion of the marginalised community in decision-making processes, as well as to raise awareness about their cultural heritage and the importance of preserving it. Working with community leaders, civil society organisations and other stakeholders to form coalitions and advocate for change is one example. It is also critical to address any underlying political or social issues that may be contributing to certain communities' exclusion from the heritage safeguarding process. Working with government officials, international organisations or other actors to address issues such as discrimination, a lack of resources or unequal representation may be part of this. Finally, the goal should be to promote an inclusive and participatory approach to heritage preservation that values all cultural traditions and identities. This can help foster social cohesion, intercultural understanding and a sense of shared heritage among all members of a community, regardless of background or socio-economic status. Serbian anthropology has made some strides in this regard, particularly in the inclusion of minority

communities in the UNESCO framework for the protection of ICH, balancing the need for their recognition with the need to ensure that protection does not become an essentialisation of identity, which would harm individuals who do not wish to preserve their heritage through ethnic or religious collectives.

In that regard, standard stakeholder inclusion strategies may be essentialising and preventive of grassroots agency. The standard anthropological approach, as advocated by critical heritage studies, holds that academics should not enter the field of heritage preservation for any reason other than to research and criticise. It claims that safeguarding is neither natural nor objective. Although clearly justified by economic, educational and cultural considerations, heritage processes are primarily hidden national homogenisation projects based on the exclusion of minorities by a nexus of the school system, the media, academia, bureaucracy, political parties and major denominations. Because of UNESCO's unwilling legitimisation of mythologising majority or dominant cultures through the implementation of its conventions, anthropology and critical heritage studies' approach to ICH has been predominantly critical (Kurin 2007; Weller and Wolff 2008; Milenković, Antonijević and Spremo 2019; Seglow 2019, Brumman 2021).

Rather than taking the default position on the inherently negative nature of essentialisation, on which heritage safeguarding is based, we took a proactive stance and attempted to include ICH stakeholders in the process – primarily representatives of ethnic and religious minorities, of which there are officially 32 in Vojvodina alone (Stojšin 2015). Our previous research findings (Milenković 2014, 2016; Ćuković 2019) suggest that deconstructing the ICH, which is symbolic of collective identities, tends to confuse non-academic actors in heritagisation processes, turning academic-based ICH safeguarding into a counter-indicative instrument, unwittingly contributing to the re-weaponisation of identity and the rise of culture-based extremism. Instead, we investigated the possibilities of the more common, publicly acceptable ethnological approach to cultural identity, cultural memory, folklore and cultural traditions in search of an academic-based, unoffensive – in other words, effective – approach to post-conflict societies' heritage stakeholders. Our approach involves the intentional facilitation of stakeholder consultation in all phases of the safeguarding process, in line with UNESCO's Operational Guidelines.² We were especially dedicated to

involving minority-group stakeholders who are currently 'missing' from heritagisation processes due to the more technical and professional character of safeguarding processes while maintaining research ethics standards. Such an intervention through research, however, proved unnecessary. UNESCO raised a concern that the state and institutions for ICH protection would force communities to define practice and transmit their ICH in ways that are unacceptable to them, or to safeguard aspects of their intangible heritage which they do not wish to continue practising and transmitting, in the document 'Roles of stakeholders in implementing the Intangible Heritage Convention'. This is not the case with the interlocutors in Vojvodina, because they are willingly adapting their cultural representation in order for it to be suitable to be protected and financed. They see it as a way to help their community in economic terms and to ensure international importance and visibility. What is most intriguing is that during the field research, we discovered that the academic incentive may not be as necessary as we thought, and our interlocutors are working hard to impose themselves as the stakeholders.

Do 32 ethnicities require 32 safeguarding practices?

There are funds that actually finance you for being yourself?!.... To stay what you are and what you were... I will gladly use that...

An increasing number of ICH studies are concerned with cultural representation and cultural identity through the prism of political and social activism.³ Since the ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Republic of Serbia in 2010, the competent administrative bodies have been established through which Serbia has become part of the global system for the preservation of the ICH.⁴ In recent decades, the sporadic interests of various formal and informal non-governmental organisations have emerged, mostly composed of the bearers of the ICH elements, who have become interested in protecting them through the regulations of the Convention. The research was conducted in Vojvodina, an autonomous province of the Republic of Serbia, which has suffered repeated administrative, political, economic and cultural turmoil. Vojvodina in the present day is a multicultural autonomous province, a fertile ground for researching the construction

of identity based on the elements of intangible culture in the heritage of minority communities, as well as the consequences of multicultural policies. The research included interviews with individuals working in the context of cultural management; these interviews aimed to examine the reasons why and ways in which the interested parties in this multiethnic province have decided to deal with the protection of the ICH.

The field research was conducted between September 2015 and March 2019. For this particular article, 26 interviews were considered. The research included interviews with members of predefined minority groups (Macedonians, Hungarians, Slovaks, Romanians, Roma, Croats, Ruthenians, Bunjevci, Bosniaks, Albanians), but also with individuals whose identities are not easily or necessarily placed in any one of the categories, in accordance with their complex self-representation. In that sense, it is important to note that the research is dedicated to individuals who do not share the identity of the majority of the population of the Republic of Serbia – and the official knowledge of and attitude towards cultural heritage. Also significant is that any determination of identity was made by the respondents themselves, so some elements of cultural heritage, such as language, were not considered identity determinants if the respondent did not want them to be.⁵

It turned out that the respondents view their cultural identity as a resource that is worth cultivating in the right place and in the right way. As Ana Góral noted, discussions about local development and the resources used to enhance it increasingly revolve around the multitude of so-called interest groups connected with such resources. When analysing the structure of the space in which ICH resources operate, it can be seen that its essential part includes people or groups who perceive these resources as an opportunity to meet their own individual needs or to develop the whole community. This development can be interpreted in different dimensions: social, economic, political and cultural. Thus, stakeholders, when they meet their needs by using cultural heritage resources, have a significant impact on their preservation and growth, and at the same time, these resources significantly affect the actors themselves as well as their development and relations with the environment. In this way, the interaction between cultural heritage resources and their users becomes bilateral (Góral 2018, 2). We developed this approach in a complex multi-ethnic region to suggest the need to incorporate a multilateral stakeholder interest

model in further ICH research and management practices. By questioning whether each community requires the contextual calibration of safeguarding practice to meet its peculiarity, and thus legitimise the whole ICH safeguarding system, we argue for a multilateral stakeholder inclusion model to be further considered as a ground-breaking solution to the increased politicisation of heritagisation processes in post-conflict societies, and in the Western Balkans in particular. Cultural policies need to be understood not simply as administrative matters, but as a world view that defines the character of a society and how its citizenry define themselves (Mulcahy 2017, 8).

UNESCO's knowledge-to-policy materials⁶ point out that culture has worth not only because of its inherent value but also because of its instrumental value. Culture is thus essential in addressing global challenges, through its role in economic growth, in human development, as a storehouse of environmental knowledge and as a symbolic force to bring stability and meaning to communities worldwide. It produces principles of inclusiveness and global ethics, enabling even the most marginalised individuals and groups to participate in development processes and benefit from them. Culture provides solutions that respond to local specificities, as a driver of development in its own right as well as a desirable outcome of development efforts. Culture is a powerful global economic engine generating jobs and income. Heritage, especially UNESCO World Heritage sites, produces revenue from visits and sale of local crafts, music and cultural products, for example, which in turn generate employment for communities. Culture also bears a reconstructive force: intercultural dialogue brings peace and possibilities of reconciliation in the event of conflict; following a disaster, culture in all its forms helps communities reconstruct their disrupted lives and restore psychological well-being. The symbolic force of cultural heritage is a further feature: culture is a wellspring of hope, enabling a deep sense of belonging. Social cohesion can also arise from cultural tourism: cultural heritage not only generates income but also builds social cohesion, mobilising communities around its care and management. Cultural festivals enhance dialogue. Traditional systems of environmental management are of special concern: accumulated traditional knowledge and the community practices of environmental management are fundamental to sustainability and essential for the survival of the place and people. Development approaches and programmes have often failed to recognise that societies categorised as

'underdeveloped' have in fact been living sustainably for generations.⁷

As Baxter has already pointed out, cultural heritage can be understood within a business context, in terms of an industrial sector comprising organisations working to supply products or services associated with the understanding, protection and promotion of objects, sites, monuments and other forms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage (2014, 2). In this case, informants regard their identity as a product and their behaviour as a service, which our fieldwork corroborates. This is most apparent in the context of tourism based on the heritage of humankind. The majority of global travel entails some element of the cultural past, as hundreds of millions of people visit cultural attractions, heritage festivals and historic places each year (Timothy 2011). Parts of the communities' inherited social constructs are being transformed into cultural heritage resources – commodities for exchange and exploitation through modern tourism development (George 2016, 15). Intangible heritage protection is more convenient for the exploitation of cultural identity as a resource, since it supports the value of 'carriers' and 'transmitters' of cultural heritage – not only the masterpieces but also the masters, the owners and successors of skills and knowledge (Abu Bakar, Osman and Bachok 2011, 3).

For anthropology there is another – not so bright – side of culture, perceived by many as oppressive and violent towards the human species, or some groups or individuals in a given time.⁸ In addition, cultural identity refers to the cognitive and affective appreciation of group membership. Depending on personal and social circumstances, cultural identity can either be an asset or a danger (Vedder and Geel 2017, 1).

Stakeholders in the province of Vojvodina

Throughout the cities and villages of Vojvodina, entities that are considered (by the community) as the most competent in interpreting, preserving and representing cultural heritage are local museums, cultural and artistic associations, tourist organisations and various NGOs. Members of the local community are not generally regarded, either by the general public or by themselves, as knowledgeable in the field of their own heritage.

When our interlocutor, who is in his 50s and declares himself a member of the Romanian community, was

asked to interpret an ICH element, he responded with the following indicative statement:

If you're interested in cultural heritage, I don't know what to tell you... You have traditional dance groups over there – they know it best... They make their own costumes and everything... Don't ask me...

There are many associations in parts of Vojvodina that deal with the promotion of cultural heritage. For them, it is an important resource and part of the entrepreneurial potential of the community. Some associations – for example, Vardar in the village of Kačarevov (which is actually a wider association based in Pančevo, covering the entire South Banat district), or Ethno Corner – have a museological and performative approach to culture, based on engaging concepts such as 'traditional', 'old' and 'aesthetic'. Many respondents refer to the 'protection of traditional values' as the main goal. In such associations, which are usually closely related to cultural and artistic societies in a given place, it is most convenient to connect with individuals who are in various ways related to cultural management. There, one can also find an individual who has a certain authority in the local administration and to whom everyone refers when it comes to large projects. Such an individual holds a sort of monopoly over cultural resources. Conversation can develop in several directions, depending on multiple parameters. One of them is the nature of the interviewee's job – whether the interviewee is employed in a state institution or is part of the non-governmental sector. The second is whether the interviewee feels any enthusiasm for cultural heritage or whether the interviewee's commitment is formal. This, of course, cannot be determined with precision, but there are respondents who admit that they are not interested, or at least were not initially motivated by interest in heritage and its protection:

We had an idea about starting to do something... and what are we going to do... We are good managers; we were trained for that... We spotted the call for applications and we decided to get involved in cultural heritage.

Quite frequently, specialists from state institutions that are part of the network do not find the motivation to protect everything that is considered cultural heritage. A recent exploration of the bureaucratisation of heritage safeguarding (Bortolotto et al. 2020) pointed to not only

the promises but also the perils of a 'creative' approach to heritagisation. Our findings support the argument that bureaucratic creativity sometimes involves the power to re-create, exclude and use. For instance, an archaeologist from the town of Novi Sad noted in the interview that there is a 'great pomp about cultural heritage' and that 'today everything is considered to be cultural heritage [...] therefore, it is important to establish clear criteria'. However, there are many activists in the field of cultural heritage protection who show great enthusiasm and evident concern for the fate of cultural heritage. A member of the Romanian national minority considers himself a fighter for Romanian rights in Vojvodina and is dedicated to fighting for the preservation of cultural heritage elements that are recognised at the state level. He also viewed the ethnographic interview as an arena in which to fight to find something that would help him reach his goal.

But wait, we can do everything together... You can help; I'll make connections... It's a noble job! I can see that you're interested.

There are not many young people who hold leadership positions in organisations and associations dealing with minority heritage. For an interlocutor from Petrovaradin, who is a 24-year-old member of one of the largest Hungarian associations in the province of Vojvodina, this is the real perspective:

We [young people] do not want to be locked into ethnicity. We have friends of different nationalities, and we don't want ethnicity to matter. We would like to work... and have same opportunities, despite our differences.

'Being equal', however, is not always possible according not only to the testimonies of older members of minority groups but also to younger ones who live in other places:

It's good to stick together with your people... Not everyone is the same here; they don't have the same level of [political] representation in places where it is important, and they are not recognised and appreciated in the same way.

Instead of conversation about ICH elements, there are inexhaustible narratives about projects, funds, organisations and associations. Self-identity becomes a

resource for supporting everyday living and a strategy for survival in bureaucratic discourse. The words with which we began, highlighting 'funds that finance you for being yourself' are from a 28-year-old considering starting her own NGO. Her narrative is formed around the idea that the cultural heritage of minorities is not overshadowed by the heritage of the majority population of a country, but by the global heritage of the so-called developed world (which was among the founding narratives of the whole approach that led to the Convention).⁹

Interviewees of Roma ethnicity who are active in the field of protection of cultural heritage are primarily concerned about the existential problems of members of their community. They are culturally heterogeneous and not well organised because of differing identity markers such as language and religion. The narrative of an older Roma man from Novi Sad was formed around the excommunication he experienced within the Roma community because he speaks both Hungarian and Serbian, and because he is Catholic not Orthodox. The first step for the Roma, according to an activist in a Roma organisation in Novi Sad, the capital of the province, is to recognise the distinctive elements of the Roma minority. He sees cultural heritage, especially ICH, as a resource of cultural entrepreneurship. This is the prevailing narrative among respondents coming from identity-centred political parties and movements:

Cultural heritage is our opportunity and future. One should be maximally involved in the flow of funds and know how to write a project application.

When I found out about the intangible cultural heritage, I realised that someone had finally seen the real thing. Because people have rich cultural heritage... It is necessary to shed light on that... It is necessary to help... How we treat the heritage is the heritage we leave [to our children].

When asked how they see ICH, our interlocutors usually point to definitions which are extracts from the Convention. They consider ICH an important part of the cultural community, an identity creator and a powerful recreator, a 'gift from the past', a 'gift of our ancestors'. The notion of diversity was a dominant value for this group of interviewees:

Intangible cultural heritage, for me, is primarily

nurturing the tradition and cultural diversity that was formed in the past... The basic principle of oral culture is to preserve and pass tradition from older to younger generations and thus create a sense of identity and authenticity.

The interlocutor who gave this definition is currently living in Novi Sad. What he stated largely coincides with how the UNESCO Convention defines ICH, yet he adds an emotional connotation to it. As a history student, he is interested in the processes of the construction of national identities, but he is also one of the few individuals in cultural management who is emotionally invested in and culturally and ethically burdened by his actions. It turned out to be very important to ask additional questions about what it really means to 'do something' for your community. Respondents were highly motivated to help the community, both the minority to which they belong and the wider local community. There are answers regarding the connection of the community to the place as well as ones based on the symbolic elements of culture. These are the answers from an interlocutor from Kačarevo village, a mixture of many ethnicities, including members of former Yugoslav-recognised 'peoples' such as Macedonians:

Some of our problems go beyond the problems of the community... I mean, we need finances for the village, to be nicer, better, to make it more pleasant for all of us to be there... It's for everyone, not just for Macedonians... Secondly, gender problems are universal, and we need to fight together... I want to tell you that we need to fight with every means provided to us.

One way to 'do something' for the community, respondents agree, is to protect the elements of ICH and to get involved in the protection system. And many are already working on it:

We are collecting that documentation for one of our festivals, but it is certainly not easy. Sometimes enthusiasm alone is not enough, and that way is a little foreign to us... how to put it together, but, yes, we try... We have instructions... We are in contact with people. I think it's all good for us.

They also spoke about the importance of having a community interested in their intangible heritage:

I think that identification with the intangible cultural

heritage is important, and that it is something that is alive and that is transmitted and important for the members of that community.

A portion of the research was devoted to the interlocutors' daily lives outside of work and possible political engagement (some of them are members of the political parties of their minorities). Every word of the activist and cultural manager is carefully planned to serve the purpose of self-promotion and cultural representation. Questions about socialising and leisure were reduced in their answers either to authentic dinners with tambourines and wine, 'which is part of the mentality', or to the Exit¹⁰ festival, which is a symbolic witness to the 'international' character of the residents of Novi Sad and its supranational competencies. Their lives are declaratively cosmopolitan, but they also have a deep awareness of the cultural heritage of the minority group to which they belong. When a Slovak girl spoke about naive painting (which is very valuable for the Slovak community because it is their only element included in the National Register of ICH elements),¹¹ she said that the motifs in the paintings depict the everyday life of the Slovak community. However, this cannot be completely true, because it is clear that painting portrays everyday life in a pastoral ideal, an imagined life in the past, which has little in common with the modern life of the Slovak community. Young Slovaks in Vojvodina do not frequently meet on rural estates, nor are agricultural techniques the same, nor are their national costumes worn on all occasions. However, only painting and the technique itself are part of the heritage, which is accepted by younger painters, and the creation of these narratives and their maintenance is an important part of preserving the Slovak identity.

Many interlocutors in cultural management are torn between the identity of the promoter of the UNESCO system for the protection of the ICH and European projects and the identity of the critic. There is always awareness about how regulations and project ideas are inapplicable to the domestic field, Vojvodina. Finally, it is important to consider the ambivalent attitude of the research participants, which we classified as a group of activists, towards the state and provincial administration, as evident in their statements. Some respondents, who work in the non-governmental sector, believe that the state is insufficiently active in matters of preserving minority heritage, that the means allocated for this particular activity are insignificant and symbolic and that they serve only 'to perpetuate

bureaucratic formalities'. However, this form provided by law can serve as a framework for political machinations, since before the parliamentary elections, mass minority parties were established in Vojvodina, which do not need to pass the general census to be part of the parliament, but use the principle of 'natural threshold'.¹² Therefore, there is a well-founded suspicion among our interlocutors, as well as among the general public, that some of these parties were established to represent minorities, but are in fact used by the ruling party:

I believe that it is part of the plan of our ruling party¹³ ... and in such an atmosphere, I am really not convinced that anyone really cares about either our lives or our cultural heritage. Because those in power use some of our minority privileges to gain even more power... I don't trust the state.

Whether such a suspicion is justified, it is not uncommon. It is expressed by almost all informants, except for a few individuals employed in the public sector, who are themselves members of the ruling party. The current political situation in Serbia, in relation to cultural heritage, identities and minority groups, deserves a separate and thorough analysis,¹⁴ but it is an important factor in considering the possibility of creating an inclusive register. What is crucial in this case, as one of my respondents noted, is that

people in Serbia who deal with cultural heritage are experts... archaeologists, you ethnologists, art historians... But they are not so much politicians yet. Even though they use it, they are not yet in decision-making positions because they do not see so much interest, you understand.

Analysis

Cultural identity is an individual sense of self derived from formal or informal membership of groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions and ways of life (Lee 2016, 2). Let us start by stressing that not all the interviewees are in the same situation. Vojvodina's minorities differ in number, and they differ in cultural and demographic characteristics, such as average age and educational structure (Stojšin 2015, 35). Also, national minorities are not equally represented when promoting their values. Although there are many nationalities living in Vojvodina,

the tourist product mostly covers the Hungarian and Slovak nationalities (Pivac et al. 2014, 38).

There are, then, evident differences within the same group of stakeholders. According to UNESCO's document 'Capacity building for stakeholders involved in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage in Burkina Faso', there are at least five groups of stakeholders involved in implementing the Intangible Heritage Convention:

- 1) central government and regional and local administrations;
- 2) communities, groups and individuals who practise and transmit their ICH;
- 3) organisations designed or created by the state to oversee the implementation of the Convention;
- 4) NGOs and community-based organisations; and
- 5) experts, centres of expertise and research institutions.

While our interlocutors are drawn from all these stakeholder groups, most of them are active in some kind of NGO or community-based organisation. Even if some of these groups are intertwined and dependent on funds from outside the Republic of Serbia,¹⁵ it was important for each of our interviewees to show respect for the regional coordinator in Serbia, the opinion of the Centre for Intangible Heritage of Serbia and the other groups so that cooperation on the whole can set an example of cultural heritage management, involving all stakeholders, especially the local community as a bearer of these resources.

This is the key to understanding why cultural identity is perceived as a resource. Once someone enters the bureaucratic arena of 'right' and 'positive' culture, they become intimidated by not being 'adequate' and therefore not financed. Some interlocutors were willing to admit that they are adjusting their cultural identity and elements of ICH to make them 'financeable'. Although the bearers of the heritage are also marked as stakeholders by UNESCO, if they decide to take their part in safeguarding activities, they either have to look for professional help or equip themselves to operate within the system.

What are the reasons for our interlocutors to participate in the management of their own ICH? The most common goals are to increase the tourist potential and attractiveness of the place where certain community

lives, to influence political mapping and to obtain greater participation in decision-making. These people insist on inclusion, first at the individual level and then at the community level. They are attempting to carve a path to administrative and political positions, as well as a place in the country's decision-making structure. Such activism should be encouraged because it is the foundation for establishing a valid basis for true minority participation in matters of public importance, especially since it is set by the minorities themselves, with the state providing support but not initiating the process, and by developing an overall strategy to include minorities (Grewe 2011, 66). In other words, the state should take advantage of any situation in which minority representatives wish to participate in state structures, because doing so demonstrates that minority groups respect the state and see it as a legitimate actor and a structure within which they can gain their rights. Protests, riots, turning to home or third countries, avoiding the government and other actions are possible alternatives (Gillion 2013, 58–64). To summarise, when the bearers of ICH elements from various communities in Vojvodina begin to participate in the safeguarding system, they are not only 'just bearers' but activists operating in the domain of identity politics through strategic self-essentialisation.

As Baxter has already pointed out, cultural heritage can be understood within a business context, in terms of an industrial sector comprising organisations working to supply products or services associated with the understanding, protection and promotion of objects, sites, monuments and other forms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Baxter 2014, 2). In this case, informants regard their identity as a product and their behaviour as a service, which our fieldwork corroborates. This is most apparent in the context of tourism based on the heritage of humankind. The majority of all global travel entails some element of the cultural past, as hundreds of millions of people visit cultural attractions, heritage festivals and historic places each year (Timothy 2011). Parts of the communities' inherited social constructs are now being transformed into cultural heritage resources – commodities for exchange and exploitation through modern tourism development (George 2016, 15). Intangible heritage protection is more convenient for the exploitation of cultural identity as a resource, since it supports the value of 'carriers' and 'transmitters' of cultural heritage – not only the masterpieces but also the masters, the owners and successors of the skills and knowledge (Abu Bakar, Osman and Bachok 2011, 3).

Conclusion: on the relevance of the phenomenon of 'self-stakeholderisation' of ICH bearers

We discovered that, according to UNESCO's definition of stakeholders' 'division of labor', informants who belong to the second group (communities, groups and individuals who practise and transmit their ICH) are strategically and voluntarily shifting to the third (organisations designed or created by the state to oversee the implementation of the Convention, such as NGOs and community-based organisations). As a result, our research shows that 32 ethnicities do not require 32 safeguarding practices because they were discovered to stakeholderise themselves in a unified manner. Individuals or groups are recognising their own status as stakeholders in a particular context, rather than being defined as stakeholders by external parties. This could potentially involve asserting their rights or interests, or advocating for their perspectives to be taken into account in decision-making processes. In the context of bottom-up initiatives, 'self-stakeholderisation' could refer to the process of individuals or communities identifying themselves as stakeholders in a particular issue or project and taking ownership of their role in effecting change.

The concept of 'self-stakeholderisation' could be useful in explaining heritage safeguarding practices by minorities, especially if the focus is on bottom-up approaches to cultural heritage preservation. For example, if a minority group is at risk of losing their cultural heritage as a result of external pressures or neglect from mainstream institutions, they may need to take proactive measures to safeguard their heritage and take ownership of the process through initiatives such as community-led conservation, documentation and advocacy. The minority group can assert their agency and stakeholder status in the heritage preservation process by 'self-stakeholderising', rather than relying solely on external actors to take action. This can help ensure that their perspectives, values and practices are considered and that their ICH is protected in a meaningful and relevant way to their community. In this sense, 'self-stakeholderisation' can be viewed as a way for minority groups to shape the narrative surrounding their heritage in ways that reflect their own experiences and perspectives, thereby strengthening their sense of cultural identity and preserving their heritage for future generations. Unlike standard anthropology and critical heritage studies' approach, which sees the system as inherently and systemically violent towards minorities,

during the fieldwork we encountered the ICH safeguarding system as a way for people or movements to assert their agency and stakeholder status in situations where their cultural heritage is neglected or threatened.


'Self-stakeholderisation' can also be a powerful tool for preserving minority heritage, particularly in situations where external actors may not prioritise the needs and perspectives of minority communities. Minority communities may not need to invent new ways to protect their heritage in some cases, but rather to self-stakeholderise themselves within existing systems or structures. Advocating for their interests and perspectives within established institutions, such as government agencies or cultural heritage organisations, can be part of this. Collaboration with external actors to promote minority heritage preservation may also be part of this approach. Minority communities, for example, could collaborate with cultural heritage organisations or academic institutions to conduct research, devise conservation strategies or raise awareness about the importance of their heritage. This is what we discovered as well: by becoming self-stakeholders within larger heritage preservation networks, minority communities can leverage their own expertise and perspectives to help shape how heritage is safeguarded and promoted.

When communities feel excluded, they can position themselves as stakeholders in the heritage safeguarding process by accepting the existing UNESCO-based system. By doing so, they can advocate for the inclusion of their cultural heritage in the heritage safeguarding process and promote their own vision of cultural heritage preservation within the existing framework. This approach can be especially effective when there is a lack of resources or support for the preservation of minority cultural heritage, or when there are political or social barriers to participation. At the same time, it is critical to acknowledge that the existing UNESCO-based system in any given country is not always fully inclusive or representative of all cultural traditions and identities. The Vojvodina province may serve as a positive policymaking example, as well as an area of interest for future modelling of a globally applicable self-stakeholderisation model.

In general, communities must continue to advocate for their rights and promote their cultural heritage, as well as engage in dialogue and collaboration with other stakeholders, to ensure that the heritage safeguarding

process is inclusive and representative of all voices. However, it is frequently difficult. Political marginalisation, discrimination, a lack of resources, unequal representation or a failure to recognise certain cultural traditions and identities are all common barriers to inclusion. A minority community's ability to self-stakeholderise in the heritage safeguarding system will be determined by a variety of factors, including the local context, political climate, available resources and the community's specific needs and priorities.

Strategies that communities can use to self-stakeholderise themselves in the heritage safeguarding system include the following: building alliances and networks with other minority communities and civil society organisations that share similar goals and values; developing partnerships with academic institutions and heritage experts to increase the visibility and recognition of the community's cultural heritage; engaging in advocacy and outreach to government authorities, policymakers and the general public; conducting self-initiated research and documentation on the community's cultural heritage and sharing this knowledge with other stakeholders; developing innovative and inclusive approaches to heritage preservation that reflect the community's values and priorities. We conclude that self-stakeholderisation, which allows for a collaborative approach to safeguarding cultural heritage, can be an effective post-conflict strategy for minority heritage preservation. In situations where there has been conflict or tension between minority communities and the state apparatus, dialogue and collaboration may be more productive than confrontation. Minority communities can work towards a shared goal of heritage preservation while also building relationships and fostering understanding between different groups by self-stakeholderising within existing systems or collaborating with external actors. This can aid in conflict resolution and social cohesion. In this sense, self-stakeholderisation can be viewed as a constructive and non-violent approach to post-conflict heritage preservation that can aid in the promotion of healing and reconciliation among various groups.

More comparative research is needed to determine whether what seem to be significant findings in this research are inherent, unintended consequences of the implementation of the ICH safeguarding system in general, or a contextual specificity of our fieldwork. 

ENDNOTES

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2. The Operational directives raise a number of possibilities and suggestions regarding the need for increased sensitivity to minority heritage by state parties. They significantly modify the heritagization process in terms of stakeholder inclusion and are important, yet under researched, extension of the Convention itself. https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/ICH-Operational_Directives-7.GA-PDF-EN.pdf
3. Some of the most influential are Lixinski (2011), Aykan (2014), Mozaffari and Jones (2020).
4. As stated in a periodic report on the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage submitted to UNESCO: 'The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia passed the Law on Ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage on 5 May 2010, thereby initiating the process of safeguarding ICH in accordance with the standards set out in the Convention. Establishment of the legislative and institutional framework began with the formation of competent bodies and adoption of implementing regulations which define the powers and procedures for the systemic safeguarding of ICH. The network of institutions and competent bodies in charge of implementing the Convention was put in place in 2011 and 2012 and includes: the National Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Commission on Inscription of ICH in the National Registry, the Network of Regional Coordinators (for Vojvodina, Belgrade, Central Serbia, Western Serbia, Eastern Serbia, Southern Serbia and Kosovo and Metohija), as well as the Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage of Serbia operating within the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade.' <https://ich.unesco.org/en-state/serbia-RS?info=periodic-reporting>.
5. All of the interlocutors suggested that anonymisation techniques, which are common in ethnographic research, be avoided. They insisted on having their voices heard, but we strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines that govern our research and removed data that could potentially harm them.
6. These leaflets, recommendations, guidelines and handbooks can be found in the open online library: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/>.
7. These examples are extracted from the UNESCO programme and meeting document 'The Power of culture for development', 2010.
8. Useful introductions are Giles (1987) and Hall (1980).
9. One of the goals of 2003 Convention was 'maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalisation'. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.
10. EXIT is a world-renowned music festival, founded in 2000 as a symbol of democratic changes, celebrating democracy and human rights. The festival has become a symbol of Novi Sad and Vojvodina and a cornerstone of contemporary Serbian popular culture. It has twice won the Best Major Festival award at the European Festivals Awards, in 2013 and 2017. EXIT also won the 'Best European Festival' award at the UK Festival Awards in 2007. <https://www.exitfest.org/en/exit-family/>.
11. Naive Slovak painting encompasses the painting knowledge and skills of painters – members of the Slovak ethnic community in Serbia, primarily in Kovačica, but also in other villages and towns in Vojvodina predominantly inhabited by Slovaks. More information available on the link <http://nkns.rs/en/popis-nkns/slovak-naive-art-painting-naivno-slikarstvo-slovaka>.
12. Here is a more elaborate observation of minority 'natural threshold' usage: 'The electoral law of the RS states that "[n]ational minority political parties are all those parties whose primary objective is to represent the interests of a national minority and to protect and improve the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, in accordance with international legal standards", and also minority parties are not subject to the threshold of 5 (or, under the new proposal, 3) percent of the vote to enter parliament – just reaching the natural threshold is enough to get one or more MPs from the list of a national minority political party into parliament. According to the ministry of public administration and local self-government, a total of 115 parties are registered in Serbia. Out of these, almost two-thirds are national minority parties. The group contains a wide variety, from a supposedly Slovak national party called the War Veterans of Serbia to the European Green party, which is declaratively a Russian minority organisation. No one has ever heard a word spoken in Hungarian by Nikola Sandulović, the president of the Republican Party, even though his organisation is registered as a political party of the Hungarian national community'. (The official website of this party uses only Serbian language and Cyrillic script). Similar examples are too numerous to count. <https://pescanik.net/one-off-tool-to-eliminate-rivals/>.

13. The Serbian Progressive Party has been the ruling party in the Republic of Serbia since 2012.
14. There are already a significant number of papers concerning this subject: Milenković (2014; 2016), Ćuković (2017), Ćuković and Milenković (2020), Gavrilović (2010), Krstanović and Divac (2012) and Vrdoljak (2005).
15. Participants in our research were willing to share the information on their use of funding from the EU, United States and so on. Vojvodina Hungarians look to make alliances with foreign actors, including the Hungarian government, the US government, EU institutions and assorted other media outlets and NGOs (Hagan 2009, 614).

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