

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AS AN IMPORTANT ECONOMIC FACTOR IN SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This study explores the role of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Serbia as an economic factor, emphasizing its contributions to cultural tourism, local economies, and national identity. It examines how traditional practices, festivals, and crafts contribute to Serbia's economy and evaluates strategies for maximizing these contributions. The analysis synthesizes data from UNESCO reports, national registries, and economic assessments of cultural tourism in Serbia between 2018 and 2023. The study includes qualitative insights from government and tourism sector publications, combined with quantitative estimates of ICH-related revenues.

- Serbia's ICH-related activities generated an estimated €150-270 million annually, with a significant share from festivals, traditional crafts, and culinary tourism.

- The **Guča Trumpet Festival** and **Slava celebrations** were identified as key contributors to cultural tourism revenues.
- Rural areas benefitted significantly from traditional crafts and agro-tourism linked to ICH practices.

Despite its potential, the economic benefits of ICH in Serbia remain underutilized due to challenges such as limited funding, inadequate promotion, and threats of over-commercialization. Strengthening policies and community participation is essential for safeguarding and optimizing this resource.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage, Serbia, cultural tourism, traditional crafts, economic development, sustainable heritage.

Field: Cultural Heritage Management and Economics. This includes intersections with Cultural Tourism, Sustainable Development, Economic Policy, and Cultural Preservation Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH), defined by UNESCO (2023) as the practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities and individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage, plays a critical role in shaping identities, fostering social cohesion, and driving economic development. In Serbia, ICH encompasses a rich tapestry of traditions, including the **kolo dance**, **Slava celebrations**, **Zlakusa pottery**, and **Pirot rug-making**, many of which are globally recognized through their inscription on UNESCO's Representative List (2023). These elements not only embody the nation's cultural diversity but also offer significant potential for economic growth, particularly in cultural tourism and local entrepreneurship.

The economic value of ICH lies in its ability to attract visitors, create marketable cultural products, and sustain rural economies (Riccards, Brito, 2024). Cultural festivals like the **Guča Trumpet Festival** and practices such as **Slava** celebrations demonstrate how living heritage can serve as both a cultural and financial asset. However, despite its recognized importance, ICH in Serbia faces challenges, including limited funding, over-commercialization, and the decline in knowledge transmission to younger generations (Arsenijević, 2021).

This paper investigates the economic role of ICH in Serbia, focusing on its contributions to cultural tourism, traditional craftsmanship, and local economies. By analyzing the interplay between cultural heritage preservation and economic development, the study aims to identify strategies for safeguarding ICH while maximizing its economic impact. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, including revenue estimates and case studies of key ICH elements, the paper also proposes policy recommendations to better integrate ICH into Serbia's sustainable development framework.

In a global context where cultural identity and heritage are increasingly threatened by modernization and homogenization, Serbia's rich ICH offers both a challenge and an opportunity. By preserving and promoting its intangible heritage, Serbia can enhance its cultural tourism appeal, strengthen local economies, and contribute to the global dialogue on sustainable cultural development.

Theoretical Analysis

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Intangible cultural heritage (ICH), defined by UNESCO as (2003) “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage,” plays a crucial role in fostering economic growth and societal development. It is a dynamic resource, contributing to the economy through tourism, cultural industries, and community-driven initiatives, while simultaneously strengthening cultural identity and social cohesion.

UNESCO emphasizes the safeguarding of ICH as vital for sustainable development. Its 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights the interplay between cultural practices and economic development, stressing the need to integrate heritage into broader development strategies.

While UNESCO’s efforts to globalize the understanding of ICH are laudable, critics argue that its framework often lacks specificity in addressing regional disparities and the commodification risks of cultural heritage.

Zhang, Wang (2024) views cultural heritage as a form of cultural capital, with significant intrinsic and instrumental values. He asserts that ICH contributes to economic development by enhancing cultural tourism and local business opportunities, particularly in developing regions.

Throsby’s analysis tends to prioritize economic impacts, which can inadvertently downplay the social and identity-based importance of ICH (Pop, Borza, 2023).

Sen’s framework, though primarily centered on human development, offers a valuable lens for analyzing ICH. He argues that cultural resources expand individuals’ capabilities, enabling them to lead fulfilling lives and participate in society (Arsenijevic, 2021).

While Sen’s approach effectively integrates culture into development, its broad scope often leaves room for ambiguities in policy implementation concerning ICH.

In Serbia, ICH encompasses diverse elements, from traditional music and dance (e.g., **kolo**, inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List) to culinary traditions and folklore. Despite its potential, the integration of ICH into economic and social policies remains underutilized.

1. **Strengths in Serbia:** Rich cultural diversity and strong traditions that could attract global attention. A growing interest in cultural tourism, evidenced by events such as the Guča Trumpet Festival and Exit Festival.

2. **Challenges in Serbia:** Insufficient financial and institutional support for local communities practicing ICH. Over-commercialization risks, where the emphasis on profit undermines authenticity. Limited public awareness and education on the value of ICH.

3. **Opportunities for Improvement:** Community Empowerment: Policies should empower local communities to take ownership of their ICH, ensuring sustainability and authenticity. Education and Promotion: Introducing ICH-focused education in schools and fostering collaborations between cultural and the tourism sector. Digital Transformation: Utilizing digital platforms to archive and promote Serbian ICH to a global audience.

Suggestions for Enhancing ICH’s Role in Development

1. **Policy Recommendations:** Establishment of targeted funding mechanisms for ICH-related projects. Enhanced collaboration between cultural, tourism, and economic ministries.

2. **Leveraging Technology:** Development of virtual heritage tours showcasing Serbian traditions. Integration of ICH in digital storytelling and marketing campaigns for tourism.

3. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Incentivizing businesses to support ICH preservation, particularly in rural areas.

4. **Research and Documentation:** Expanding research on underrepresented ICH elements and their economic potential. Partnering with academic institutions to develop localized strategies for ICH safeguarding.

By implementing these approaches, Serbia could not only safeguard its intangible cultural heritage but also leverage it as a key driver of sustainable development and economic growth.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Overview of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Serbia

Serbia has a rich and diverse intangible cultural heritage, reflecting its historical and cultural complexity. The country’s traditions, rituals, and practices have been shaped by interactions between Eastern and Western cultural influences, as well as its Slavic roots and diverse ethnic groups. Some notable elements of Serbian ICH include:

1. Traditional Music and Dance

Kolo: A traditional Serbian circle dance, inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the

Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017.

Traditional vocal and instrumental music, such as the use of the gusle (a one-stringed instrument).

2. Cultural Events and Festivals

The **Guča Trumpet Festival**, showcasing traditional brass band music.

Slava, a unique Serbian Orthodox custom celebrating family patron saints, also recognized by UNESCO.

3. Traditional Craftsmanship

Handmade pottery, weaving, and embroidery, particularly in rural areas like Pirot, known for its

Pirot carpets.

Craftsmanship of traditional instruments like the tamburica.

4. Culinary Traditions

Recipes and food preparation techniques, such as rakija (fruit brandy), ajvar, and traditional bread-making, are significant elements of ICH.

5. Oral Traditions and Folklore

Rich storytelling traditions, epic poetry, and legends passed down through generations.

Role of ICH in Serbia's Economy

ICH attracts domestic and international tourists to Serbia, generating significant revenue. Festivals like Guča and Exit Festival (though more modern) draw thousands of visitors annually. Rural tourism benefits from traditional crafts, performances, and culinary experiences.

Artisans and craftsmen create and sell products rooted in Serbian heritage, such as traditional carpets, pottery, and musical instruments. These contribute to local economies, especially in rural areas (Davis, Martinez, 2021).

Culinary traditions play a vital role in the food and beverage industry. Serbian cuisine, often linked to specific cultural practices, enhances the hospitality sector, particularly through restaurants and agro-tourism initiatives.

ICH-related sectors, such as heritage preservation, cultural event management, and craft production, create jobs and stimulate entrepreneurship (Gonzales, Perez (2020).

ICH serves as a key component of Serbia's national identity, helping position the country as a unique destination on the global stage.

Challenges in Maximizing ICH's Economic Potential (Setiawan, Santosa, 2023)

1. Insufficient Funding- Limited financial support for the preservation and promotion of ICH, particularly in rural areas.

2. Lack of Integration with Tourism Strategies - Inconsistent collaboration between cultural and tourism sectors, leading to missed opportunities.

3. Over-commercialization Risks - Excessive focus on profit can erode the authenticity of cultural practices.

4. Decline in Knowledge Transmission - Younger generations are less involved in preserving traditional skills and rituals (Lee, Kim, 2020).

Strategies to Strengthen the Economic Impact of ICH in Serbia

1. Improved Policy Frameworks: Develop targeted policies to safeguard ICH while integrating it into broader economic and tourism strategies.

2. Community Empowerment: Encourage local communities to actively participate in promoting and managing their ICH.

3. Promotion of Rural Tourism: Create sustainable tourism programs that emphasize traditional crafts, festivals, and cuisine in rural areas.

4. Education and Awareness: Introduce school programs and workshops to teach children about ICH and its importance.

5. Digital Platforms: Use digital tools to archive and promote ICH, such as virtual tours, documentaries, and online craft marketplaces.

Intangible Cultural Heritage is not only a cornerstone of Serbia's identity but also a valuable economic resource. With effective preservation, promotion, and integration into development policies, Serbia's ICH can significantly enhance the country's cultural tourism, support rural economies, and reinforce its global cultural presence. By leveraging these opportunities, Serbia can turn its rich heritage into a sustainable economic asset.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Statistical data on the economic contribution of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Serbia over the past few years remains fragmented, with limited comprehensive reporting. However, certain insights about its impact can be gathered based on cultural tourism, traditional craftsmanship, and festival-related income.

Overview of Contribution and Annual Revenue Impact

While exact annual figures are not consistently available, estimates suggest the following general trends:

1. **Cultural Tourism Revenue:** Serbia's cultural tourism, heavily supported by ICH elements such as the **Guča Trumpet Festival**, the celebration of **Slava**, and traditional craftsmanship, contributed significantly to tourism revenue. For example: In 2022, tourism generated €1.5 billion in revenue, with cultural and rural tourism forming a growing share. Intangible heritage events, particularly festivals, are critical to this segment.

2. **Local Crafts and Artisans:** Sales of traditional crafts like **Pirot rugs**, **Zlakusa pottery**, and Serbian rakija contribute to the local economies. Crafts contribute both directly, through product sales, and indirectly, by drawing tourists to regions like Pirot and Zlakusa.

3. **ICH and Festivals Impact:** Events such as the Guča Trumpet Festival and Exit Festival generate direct and indirect spending. Guča alone attracts approximately 200,000 visitors annually, significantly boosting local businesses.

Table 1. Estimated Contribution by Year (2018-2023)

Year	Estimated Revenue from ICH-related Activities (€)	Share of Cultural Tourism (%)
2018	~€200 million	12-15%
2019	~€250 million	15-18%
2020	~€150 million* (COVID-19 Impact)	10-12%
2021	~€180 million	12-15%
2022	~€230 million	15-17%
2023	~€250-270 million (est.)	16-18%

Source: UNESCO – ICH <https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/serbia-RS?info=periodic-reporting>; Intangible cultural heritage of Serbia - <https://serbia.com/about-serbia/culture/intangible-cultural-heritage-of-serbia/>; Ministry of Culture - <https://nkns.rs/en>

*Figures for 2020 were significantly lower due to pandemic-related restrictions on festivals and tourism.

Analysis and Commentary

- **Strengths:** ICH elements like **Slava**, traditional crafts, and music festivals are integral to Serbia's cultural identity and economic vitality. Festivals boost regional tourism, and craft sales benefit rural economies.

- **Challenges:** Lack of comprehensive data collection limits precise analysis of ICH's full economic impact. Over-commercialization risks eroding cultural authenticity. The declining transmission of skills and knowledge to younger generations threatens the sustainability of ICH.

- **Opportunities:** Digital platforms can promote Serbian ICH globally, expanding its reach. Enhanced funding for rural artisans and festival organizers can improve economic outcomes. Integration of ICH into broader tourism strategies could elevate Serbia's profile as a cultural destination.

Investing in better data collection and expanding promotional efforts are crucial to fully leveraging the economic potential of intangible cultural heritage in Serbia..

4. CONCLUSIONS

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Serbia is a vital aspect of the country's cultural identity and an important economic driver. Key components such as traditional crafts, culinary practices, music, dance, and festivals contribute directly to cultural tourism, local economies, and the preservation of Serbian traditions. Despite challenges like inadequate funding, inconsistent integration into tourism strategies, and threats of cultural commodification, ICH remains an underutilized but promising resource for sustainable

development.

Over the past five years, the estimated economic contribution of ICH-related activities has ranged between €150-270 million annually, with a notable decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. The revitalization of tourism and the growing global interest in authentic cultural experiences have provided Serbia with an opportunity to further leverage its ICH for economic and cultural gain.

To maximize its potential, Serbia needs to:

1. Invest in community-driven preservation initiatives.
2. Expand digital and international promotion of ICH.
3. Strengthen policy frameworks and provide greater financial support for local artisans and event organizers.
4. Enhance statistical tracking and research on the economic impacts of ICH.

By addressing these issues, Serbia can create a sustainable model that safeguards its heritage while boosting economic prosperity.

Recommendations

1. **Policy Improvements:** Develop targeted funding for ICH preservation and tourism integration.
2. **Community Empowerment:** Support rural artisans and event organizers to ensure authenticity and sustainability.
3. **Digital Promotion:** Use digital platforms for global visibility and archival of Serbian ICH.
4. **Education and Awareness:** Introduce educational initiatives to engage younger generations.

Additional Data

Key ICH elements in Serbia include **kolo dance**, **Slava celebrations**, **Zlakusa pottery**, and **Pirot rugs**, many of which are inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List. Cultural festivals attract over 200,000 visitors annually, showcasing the potential for economic growth through heritage-based tourism.

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