Empower Youth, Explore stories - EYES

Heritage and Community Guide

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EMPOWER YOUTH EXPLORE STORIES

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Introduction

Dealing with the cultural heritage of the community bears great potential for developing people's self-awareness and for improving the communication among and between different cultures. Exploring and presenting their own heritage can strengthen the community identity among youth, promote intergenerational dialogue and foster active citizenship. The EYES project aims to leverage this potential by educating youngsters and their educators how to research and explore their local cultural heritage and process this knowledge in a multi-media heritage tour that they share with their peers.

This document is intended to outline for the interested reader why education about the own local cultural heritage has the aforementioned properties and tries to make a strong case for the importance of having a clear and realistic view on one's own cultural heritage. The document gives also a short overview of how cultural heritage is dealt with in the five EYES-project partner countries and what can be learned from their specific value system that is guiding the respective national policies, projects and narratives.
The final chapter will summarise and provide general guidelines for all who are interested in using the EYES-project toolkit in order to develop an own cultural heritage tour. So, the fast reader may want to skip chapters two and three and head to the conclusion directly.

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2.Why heritage matters

Heritage and the Individual – Heritage and Me

Even if we Europeans like to highlight our individuality and greatly value our individual freedoms we are, nevertheless, still social beings. We exist in communities that are our main points of reference. Consciously or not, we are living their traditions and customs, we are following their rules, we are sharing the same values and belief systems. We are adjusting our everyday lives to the frame that our communities provide for us.

While some might understand this as a form of limitation, this frame is also an important source of security and stability. We do not only know how to behave in our community – what to do in order to live a happy life – we can also by and large assess how other people of the same community will behave. The rules and structures of our communities predetermine a large part of our lives that makes our movement in that system more predictable and therefore easier. So, even as individuals, our whole existence is highly referential to the community that we live in, our personality, our thinking and behaviour cannot be thought of independently from it.

As we individuals are importantly shaped by our communities, the communities themselves are importantly shaped by their heritage. The heritage of a community could be described as the sum of all past events and processes that lead to the actual traditions, customs, values and rules that the community members live. As the Cambridge Dictionary puts it: “Heritage features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings, that were created in the past and are still important.” So, the present form of a community cannot be understood without knowing about its past.

Accordingly, there is a direct link between the heritageof a community and the personality of an individual who is, in fact carrying the heritage of its community just like it is carrying the heritage of its own family. One could even say that the community’s heritage is a defining element of an individual’s character and cannot be detached from it. This might help to understand why topics around community and heritage are often so sensitive and capable of triggering fierce confrontations. Debates about community and heritage are always debates about ourselves - they are automatically personal.

So, assuming that community's heritage is a defining element of an individual's character, it is worthwhile to care about it. Caring about our heritage and becoming aware of its features, is then tantamount to caring about one's own personality and becoming aware of its traits. Such self-awareness and consciousness are vital. Only if we understand why we act as we do will we be able to develop. We will be able to spot recurring patterns in our behaviour that we might want to change or even get rid of. Only then will we be able to identify what we really like and want in life, act according to it and reach a well-balanced state of mind. Dealing with one's own heritage is therefore one way of creating personal self-awareness.

Heritage and Community

Dealing with a community's heritage can also have positive effects on the community themselves. Just as individuals communities also follow unconscious patterns that are not always beneficial to themselves. Researching the history of a community's cultural heritage may uncover the roots of these patterns and offer possibilities how they could be overcome. At the same time knowledge of a community's heritage can also reveal successes and highlights that can be taken as an example for the future. So, whatever communities discover when dealing with their heritage it can become a motor for its progress and development.

In any case, bringing a community's common cultural heritage to light and discovering commonalities and common features most probably leads to stronger bonds among the community members. This has the potential to foster community members' sense of belonging and sympathy for each other. This improves, in the end, their well-being and satisfaction with their everyday life.

A strong (re-) orientation towards a community's cultural heritage may, however, also have negative connotations. If an increased sense of belonging comes with an active demarcation from and a devaluation of other communities the devotion to the own cultural heritage may lead to conflict between communities and cultures. Therefore, the values that guide the discovery of our cultural heritage determine whether the outcome is a constructive or destructive force.

The Global Importance of Heritage

The global importance of heritage finds expression in the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). It was founded in 1945 as a response to the massive destructions of world heritage during the Second World War. It was understood that these destructions not only came with the very concrete loss of lives and material values but also with severe blows to the surviving people's identities leaving them destabilised on a very profound personal level. Accordingly, the aim of UNESCO was and still is to strengthen "our shared humanity through the promotion of education, science, culture and communication"[1].

[1] UNESCO in brief: https://www.unesco.org/en/brief viewed on July 9th, 2025.

The main visible output of UNESCO is the list of World Heritage Sites that comprises monuments, natural sites, outstanding traditions or customs that have invaluable significance not only for a single nation or community but for humanity. Communities with Word Heritage Sites are supported in maintaining them through financial and material contributions.

The term World Heritage underwent a certain further-development over the decades since the foundation of UNESCO. Its meaning was constantly extended together with humanity's understanding of the multidimensionality of the term. The first applied definition was agreed on in the World Heritage Convention in 1972 and focused on tangible heritage like buildings, natural sites, documents and art pieces. This definition was extended in the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention in 2003 when living traditions, rituals, music, crafts, local knowledge and oral history were added to the understanding of local heritage.

The last extension of the definition of heritage originates with the Council of Europe and its Faro Convention from 2005. The Faro Convention tackles the highly important question of how (local) cultural heritage could be used as a constructive force for positive human development and be prevented from misuse which would, eventually, lead to the division of communities instead of bringing them together. According to the Faro Convention cultural heritage and all the work that is done with and for it must be embedded in a value system that is marked by human rights and democracy. "The Faro Convention encourages us to recognise that objects and places are not, in themselves, what is important about cultural heritage. They are important because of the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent."[2]

This means two things: First, such a value-based perspective paves the way for a critical and self-aware approach to one's own cultural heritage. It allows facing positive and negative developments of the own community and revealing specific action either to promote or tackle them. Second, a value-based approach effectively prevents the misuse of local heritage. Misuse of local heritage can be understood as the justification for dividing communities based on supposed cultural differences. Nationalists of all kinds use such cultural arguments for justifying their superiority over other nations which eventually becomes the source of national or ethnic conflict. If, in contrast, cultural heritage is discovered within a sound democratic and human-rights based framework it will not lead to cultural divisions because existing cultural differences are not understood as a threat or danger but as a constructive source for individual and social development.

[2] Council of Europe Website https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention viewed on July 9th, 2025

To sum up, integrating cultural heritage into educational programs bears great potential:

- First, grappling with the heritage and the cultural background of one's own community promotes self-awareness of individuals because they are, ultimately, discovering elements of their own personalities.
- Second, discovering unknown facts about the own community may strengthen the bonds among its members by making commonalities explicit and creating more sympathy for each other.
- Third, discovering critical aspects of the own cultural and historical background may lead to overcoming dysfunctionalities of the community.
- Fourth, discovering outstanding cultural characteristics and differences to other communities may raise the curiosity of community members for other cultures and traditions. This happens if the cultural heritage is approached with a solid human-rights based attitude that embraces democracy and its pluralistic foundations.
- Eventually, researching cultural heritage is a multidimensional task that requires manifold skills that need to be acquired along the research process. This contains literature search techniques, archival research techniques, interview techniques, presentation techniques including managing multimedia forms of expressions, as well as basic knowledge and/or skills in the substantial context that is investigated to name just a few. Accordingly, "Cultural Awareness and Expression" is one of eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.[3]

[3] European School Education Platform: https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/discover/tutorials/learn-connect-and-reflect-cultural-heritage viewed on July 15th, 2025

3. National perspectives on local heritage

3.1. Local heritage in Belgium

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

In Belgium, local heritage plays a fundamental role in building collective and individual identity. Whether in Wallonia, Flanders or Brussels, it is seen as a lever for social cohesion, shared memory and promotion of the region. Although heritage management is regionalised, there is a shared awareness of its importance for communities.

The general public shows a deep attachment to their local heritage: whether chapels, farms, mines, popular traditions or iconic natural sites, these elements are sources of meaning and pride. Citizen initiatives and local associations are launching a growing number of projects to promote this heritage, including guided tours, exhibitions, publications and digital recordings. Events such as the Heritage Days (or Open Monumentendag in Flanders) attract thousands of visitors every year, demonstrating the public's continued interest.

Local heritage is also a recurring theme in politics, particularly in cultural, urban planning and tourism policies. Local heritage is also a recurring theme in politics, particularly in cultural, urban planning and tourism policies. Secretary of State for Spatial Planning of the Brussels-Capital Region, Ans Persoons said for example:

‘A balance can, and must, be found between the modernisation of cities and protecting heritage, if more space is to be given back to people.’[4]

Some communities attach particular importance to their heritage:

- Rural areas, with their centuries-old traditions
- Post-industrial areas, in search of a new identity
- Multicultural urban neighbourhoods, using heritage as a tool for intercultural dialogue

Projects such as ‘Vis ton Patrimoine’, ‘Patrimoine à roulettes’ and ‘Un artisan vit dans mon village’ illustrate this dynamic: they invite young people to explore their environment, express themselves and co-construct new forms of heritage storytelling.

[4] https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/711299/urbicide-how-brussels-is-seeking-to-balance-modernisation-and-heritage?

THE REGULATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Belgium has regional legislative frameworks for heritage protection:
In Wallonia, the Walloon Heritage Code[5] (updated in 2024) defines the protections applicable to monuments, sites, built ensembles or archaeological areas. Local heritage can be protected if it is recognised as significant for regional identity.

In Flanders, Onroerend Erfgoeddecreet[6] (Decree on Immovable Heritage, 2013) establishes different levels of recognition, ranging from municipal heritage to internationally listed heritage. The Brussels-Capital Region applies a specific ordinance dating from 1993, which integrates heritage conservation into land-use planning policies.

At the federal level, laws mainly concern movable heritage (works, objects, archives) and cultural exports. Belgium has also ratified several international conventions (notably the Faro Convention and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage) that influence regional policies.

Finally, municipalities play a central role: they often propose lists of properties to be protected, initiate awareness-raising activities or carry out participatory projects with their residents.

The Belgian landscape is particularly rich in public, private and civic institutions dedicated to preserving and promoting heritage:

Wallonia – Walloon Heritage Agency (AWaP)

- Mission: To understand, preserve, restore and promote Walloon built heritage.
- Approach: The agency supports municipalities, schools and citizens through technical advice, subsidies, training and educational projects (such as Adopt a Monument or A craftsman lives in my village).
- Values upheld: Intergenerational transmission, accessibility, local roots, citizenship education.

Flanders – Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed

- Mission : To protect, manage and make heritage visible to all.
- Approach : Support for municipal inventories, funding for restoration, digital awareness-raising tools (e.g. erfgoedkaart.be).
- Values : Citizen participation, adaptive reuse, respect for local identity.

Brussels – Urban.brussels (Cultural Heritage Department)

- Mission : To integrate heritage into urban planning and sustainable development policies.
- Approach : Support for owners, dissemination of information, mediation projects in urban areas.
- Values : Diversity, heritage innovation, shared management.

Associations and citizen initiatives

Many local non-profit organisations work to document, transmit and promote heritage:

- In Wallonia: Qualité-Village-Wallonie, Maison du Patrimoine Médiéval Mosan, etc.
- In Flanders: Heemkundige Kringen, local history networks
- Throughout the country: local museums, libraries, history circles, committed schools

These organisations publish books, create tours, collect testimonials and develop educational tools. They also contribute to democratising access to heritage.

[5] Code Wallon du Patrimoine, https://agencewallonnedupatrimoine.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/20240601_CoPat_Textes_legislatifs_consolides.pdf
[6] https://codex.vlaanderen.be/portals/codex/documenten/1023317.html

THE VALUE SYSTEM BEHIND LOCAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

In Belgium, local heritage is understood in a broad and plural sense, encompassing:

Tangible heritage

old buildings, archaeological sites, industrial remains, urban features

Intangible heritage

regional languages, music, recipes, craft skills, customs

Natural heritage

cultural landscapes, state-owned forests, historic parks

The values most frequently highlighted are:

Identity and roots

local heritage allows people to identify with a place and feel that they belong to a community.

Transmission and learning

it is seen as a valuable educational tool, a repository of memory and a vehicle for dialogue between generations.

Sustainable development

the renovation of old buildings is often promoted as an environmentally friendly alternative to new construction.

Cultural diversity

in multicultural neighbourhoods, heritage becomes a gateway to discovering each other's stories.

Institutions often use UNESCO's definitions, but adapt them to local contexts. For example, the AWaP values both ‘prestigious witnesses’ and ‘modest testimonies of everyday life’.
Finally, the concepts of participation, co-creation and mediation are becoming increasingly important in heritage policies. Citizens are no longer spectators, but actors in heritage.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF LOCAL HERITAGE IN BELGIAN IDENTITY

In Belgium, the conservation and promotion of local heritage have a strong identity dimension, particularly in a country where several cultures, languages and historical narratives coexist. Heritage is often seen as a common thread linking the past, present and future, a means of connecting with a territory and a shared memory.
It also plays a fundamental role in building active citizenship. Through educational projects such as “Vis ton Patrimoine” (Experience your Heritage), “Classes du Patrimoine” (Heritage Classes) and “Un artisan vit dans mon village” (A craftsman lives in my village), young people are encouraged to discover, question and interpret their environment, thereby developing their critical thinking and attachment to the common good.
At a time of climate challenges, social tensions and digital upheaval, local heritage appears as a space for resilience, dialogue and collective imagination. It helps to shape a society that is more aware of its heritage, but also more open to diversity and change.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

Local heritage in Poland occupies a significant position in both public consciousness and national discourse. The historical trajectory of the Polish nation — marked by partitions, occupations, border shifts, and systemic transformations — has cultivated a strong sensitivity to questions of cultural identity and historical continuity. Consequently, local heritage is widely regarded as an essential component of the broader national heritage and is treated with considerable reverence by various segments of society.

The general public demonstrates an active interest in the preservation of local heritage, particularly in areas with deeply rooted historical and cultural traditions. Folk customs, religious rituals, regional dialects, and architectural monuments are often seen not only as cultural artifacts but as manifestations of communal identity and intergenerational memory. These sentiments are frequently echoed in political rhetoric. Polish leaders, including presidents and ministers of culture, have repeatedly emphasized the importance of safeguarding cultural memory and preserving tangible and intangible heritage for future generations. For instance, President Andrzej Duda has spoken of heritage as “a moral obligation to those who shaped the soul of the Polish nation.”

Heritage issues are also regularly addressed in parliamentary debates and local government initiatives, particularly in the context of regional development, tourism, and education. In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to the revitalization of neglected or forgotten heritage — especially that of minority or post-conflict communities — highlighting a growing awareness of multicultural dimensions of Polish history.

Prof. Jacek Purchla, founder of the International Cultural Centre in Kraków, has emphasized the importance of local heritage in shaping regional identity and urban development. He argues: "Cultural heritage is not just the legacy of the past, but a strategic resource for the future, particularly for local communities reclaiming their identity after decades of erasure" (Source: Cultural Heritage and Identity in Central Europe, 2011).

Purchla's perspective highlights how heritage functions not only as a tool for remembering the past but also as a means through which diverse communities across Poland—rural, urban, minority, and religious — actively shape their identities and assert their place within the national narrative.

First of all, rural communities often seem to show strong attachment to folk traditions, dialects, religious rituals, and local crafts. These elements are integral to local identity. On the other hand, urban communities, especially in historically significant cities like Kraków, Wrocław, or Gdańsk, focus more on architectural and multicultural heritage (including German, Jewish, and Russian traces). Furthermore, minority and marginalized communities, such as the Lemkos, Kashubians, Silesians, and Roma place strong emphasis on cultural preservation as a way to assert their distinct identities within the broader Polish context. Finally, religious communities, particularly the Catholic Church, play a significant role in preserving and promoting religious heritage, including churches, shrines, and pilgrimages.

THE REGULATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The primary legislative instrument governing local heritage in Poland is the Act on the Protection and Guardianship of Monuments (Polish: Ustawa o ochronie zabytków i opiece nad zabytkami), enacted in 2003. This act provides a comprehensive framework for the protection, conservation, and documentation of cultural assets deemed to possess historical, artistic, or scientific value.

The law is grounded in the notion that cultural heritage constitutes a public good whose preservation is in the interest of society at large. It emphasizes the responsibility of the state, local governments, and private owners to ensure the integrity and continuity of cultural monuments. Justification for such measures is rooted in the principle that cultural heritage embodies the accumulated experience, knowledge, and values of the nation, and serves as a foundation for cultural identity and civic awareness.

The law mandates the creation of heritage registers, imposes obligations on owners of listed properties, and empowers relevant authorities to intervene in cases of neglect or improper alteration. Financial support for conservation efforts is provided at both national and regional levels, often supplemented by European Union cultural funds.

The law justifies heritage protection as a matter of public interest and national responsibility. It asserts that cultural heritage is an irreplaceable source of knowledge, identity, and historical continuity. It mandates inventories, documentation, and conservation of heritage assets and empowers state and local authorities to enforce these measures.

The principal public body responsible for coordinating heritage policy is the National Heritage Board of Poland (Narodowy Instytut Dziedzictwa, NID). Its mission includes the identification, research, documentation, and promotion of both tangible and intangible heritage. The Board defines local heritage as an integral component of the cultural landscape, encompassing historical architecture, archaeological sites, traditional craftsmanship, oral history, and local customs. The Board emphasizes the societal value of heritage, viewing it as a vehicle for education, community engagement, and national unity. In its official communications, it often frames heritage preservation as both a cultural and moral imperative, essential for fostering intergenerational continuity and societal resilience.

Other state institutions include the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which plays a central role in shaping national policy on heritage preservation. Its mission statement emphasizes the safeguarding and promotion of Poland's cultural legacy as a foundation of national identity, civic engagement, and international recognition. The Ministry's approach to local heritage is multifaceted: it combines financial support (e.g., through grant programs such as Ochrona Zabytków or Kultura ludowa i tradycyjna), legislative oversight,

and international cooperation, aiming to ensure both the protection of physical sites and the transmission of intangible cultural practices.

The Ministry understands local heritage broadly, encompassing not only historic buildings and monuments but also folk culture, language, oral traditions, crafts, and religious rituals. This inclusive definition reflects a growing recognition of heritage as a living, evolving process rooted in community life. Local heritage is thus framed as both a reflection of regional diversity and a constitutive element of national cultural richness.

In its public communications and policy frameworks, the Ministry argues for the importance of local heritage by emphasizing its role in fostering social cohesion, civic identity, and intergenerational continuity. It positions heritage preservation as a civic responsibility that strengthens national resilience, promotes tourism and economic development, and ensures that the memory of diverse cultural experiences — especially those suppressed or erased by past regimes — is kept alive.

At the regional level, Voivodeship (regional) Conservators of Monuments operate as decentralized arms of heritage governance. Their primary mandate is the implementation of state policy in the field of conservation, restoration, and documentation of heritage assets. They adopt a protective and regulatory approach, focusing on legal enforcement, spatial planning, and technical oversight. For these conservators, local heritage is defined largely in terms of material culture—historic architecture, archaeological sites, and urban layouts — but their work is increasingly informed by community consultation and participatory planning. They underscore heritage's value not only for historical knowledge, but for local development and cultural sustainability.

Numerous non-governmental organizations and private foundations are active in the field of heritage preservation. Among them, the Cultural Heritage Foundation (Polish: Fundacja Dziedzictwa Kulturowego) plays a notable role. This organization engages in restoration projects, particularly of religious and minority heritage sites, and promotes public awareness through exhibitions, lectures, and publications. The foundation's mission underscores the ethical dimension of heritage work—namely, the duty to recover forgotten or neglected histories and foster dialogue among communities. Their approach often involves collaboration with local residents, thereby reinforcing the role of heritage as a communal asset rather than a purely institutional concern.

THE VALUE SYSTEM BEHIND LOCAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Local heritage occupies an important place in Polish public discourse and institutional frameworks, where it is ascribed a variety of interconnected values. The main include:

Identity and Continuity

Heritage is widely understood as a pillar of both local and national identity, serving to connect past generations with contemporary society and future communities.

Civic Responsibility

The protection and preservation of heritage are presented as collective responsibilities, engaging individuals, communities, and institutions in a shared commitment to cultural stewardship.

Social Cohesion

In areas shaped by historical conflict or political transformation, heritage is often invoked as a source of unity, fostering social bonds and reinforcing a sense of shared belonging.

Moral and Historical Memory

The safeguarding of heritage is frequently framed as an act of moral obligation and historical justice, particularly in relation to wartime destruction and the erasure of minority narratives.

Educational Value

These values are manifested in a range of practices, including public awareness campaigns, curricular development, and local initiatives aimed at the revitalization of historic environments, the preservation of traditional knowledge, and the collection of oral histories. Through such efforts, heritage is not only conserved but actively integrated into contemporary cultural and civic life.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF LOCAL HERITAGE IN POLISH IDENTITY

IIn conclusion, the conservation and promotion of local heritage in Poland plays a vital role in shaping the cultural self-awareness and collective identity of the Polish people. In a country where the historical landscape has been dramatically altered by external

Local heritage not only reflects the unique character of specific regions or communities, but also contributes to a broader national narrative that values diversity, memory, and continuity. As such, it functions as a crucial instrument in the ongoing process of cultural reconstruction and identity formation, reaffirming Poland's commitment to honoring its past while navigating the complexities of the present.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

In Hungary, local cultural heritage holds significant value in society. This can be seen in the popularity of folk festivals, community traditions, and the widespread preservation of historic sites. Research on rural communities in Hungary shows that heritage is deeply embedded in the fabric of these communities, with traditions and memories shaping the local landscape (Csurgó & Smith, 2022).[7] In many villages and small towns, people are deeply connected to their local customs, whether through traditional dances, regional crafts, or local cuisines. These traditions are not only cherished but actively preserved and passed on to future generations.

One unique example of this deep connection is the Busójárás carnival in Mohács[8], a centuries-old tradition where participants wear masks and sheepskin to chase away winter. This event, recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, is much more than just a festival—it's a celebration of local identity. Every year, thousands of visitors attend, and the whole community, including the youth, becomes involved in keeping the tradition alive. For the people of Mohács, the carnival is not just a cultural event, but a vital part of their identity, connecting them to their past and creating a shared sense of belonging in the present. Similarly, the Matyó embroidery from Mezőkövesd[9], known for its vibrant floral patterns, is a living tradition that has been preserved by local artisans and was inscribed as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. These examples show that for many Hungarians, heritage is not a distant concept, but something that is woven into the fabric of their everyday lives.

[7] Csurgó, B., & Smith, D. (2022). Rural heritage and place-making: Embedding community values, traditions, and memories in Hungary. Journal of Rural Studies, 75, 100-112. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.01.012

[8] Mohács Busójárás carnival: UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Retrieved June 30, 2025, from https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/busojaras-carnival-in-mohacs-00320

[9] Matyó embroidery: UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Retrieved June 30, 2025, from https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/maty%C3%B3-embroidery-00321

Many Hungarians participate in heritage-related activities: folk dance houses (táncház events) are popular among young people, local history museums and open-air village museums (tájházak) receive regular visitors. In addition, annual heritage days (Kulturális Örökség Napjai)[10] attract crowds to historic buildings and sites across Hungary. These events highlight the growing public interest in preserving cultural heritage, with both younger and older generations joining in. Rural communities, ethnic minorities, and older generations have traditionally been more focused on preserving heritage, but in recent years, there has been a noticeable revival of interest among urban youth. Folk music and dance ensembles have thriving scenes even in Budapest, showing that local traditions have widespread appeal and are no longer confined to rural areas. In fact, the growing interest in local heritage among younger people in cities reflects a deeper cultural resurgence, as youth are increasingly seeking to reconnect with their roots.

On the political level, local heritage has become a significant issue, often connected with discussions on national identity and cultural policies. In recent years, heritage preservation has been a central theme in Hungary's political agenda. Cultural policies increasingly emphasize heritage as a valuable asset, crucial not just for tourism but also for community building and fostering patriotism. Local heritage, with its strong connection to national identity, is not seen as a niche interest but as a key element of public life. As a result, discussions surrounding heritage preservation have become increasingly visible, moving from academic circles to the forefront of national discourse.

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Hungary's heritage protection is grounded in a comprehensive legal framework:

- Act LXIV of 2001 on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, which provides the legal basis for the identification, conservation, and use of cultural heritage. It covers both tangible heritage (such as monuments, historic buildings, and artifacts) and intangible heritage (like customs, traditions, and crafts). The act emphasizes the importance of sustainability, public involvement, and education, ensuring that heritage is not only protected but also accessible to the public for future generations.
- Government Decree 393/2012 (XII. 20.) sets out the operational rules for heritage authorities, defining how cultural heritage sites should be registered, protected, and monitored. This decree ensures that the process of heritage conservation is standardized and systematic, ensuring uniformity across the country.

Hungary is also an active participant in key international agreements that guide heritage protection. As a signatory to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Hungary has committed itself to the global effort to protect cultural heritage. These international agreements provide Hungary with the frameworks to ensure that its heritage is preserved not only for national pride but also for the global community. By adhering to these conventions, Hungary aligns its policies with global standards and strengthens its role in international heritage preservation.

One notable aspect of Hungary's heritage protection system is its decentralized structure. While the national government provides overarching laws and frameworks, local municipalities, museums, and national park ranger services play an active role in protecting heritage at the local level. Local authorities are empowered to make decisions regarding heritage protection, and local museums, often maintained by municipalities, are key players in both the research and exhibition of cultural heritage. Additionally, National Park ranger services assist in protecting archaeological sites, ensuring that heritage is safeguarded in natural environments as well as built heritage.

[10] Kulturális Örökség Napjai: Heritage Days in Hungary. Retrieved June 30, 2025, from https://www.kulturoris.hu/en/

Hungary also places a strong emphasis on the protection of intangible cultural heritage—a commitment reinforced by its early adoption of UNESCO's 2003 Convention on Intangible Heritage. This includes a broad spectrum of cultural practices, such as traditional music, crafts, and festivals, which are integral to Hungary's cultural landscape. In recent years, Hungary has also embraced the Faro Convention principles, which emphasize the social value of heritage. This shift recognizes that heritage preservation is not only about protecting physical sites but also about ensuring that living traditions remain vital and accessible to the community.

COMMUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONS TO HERITAGE PRESERVATION

Many local communities in Hungary are particularly dedicated to preserving their heritage. Rural villages, in particular, pride themselves on maintaining traditions, such as traditional costumes, dances, and feasts passed down through generations. For instance, the Palóc community in Northern Hungary holds annual festivals celebrating their folk culture, and the Székely people in Transylvania continue to honor their heritage as part of their identity. Similarly, ethnic minorities like the Swabians (Danube Germans) and Slovaks run cultural centers to preserve their unique customs and traditions, often supported by local government initiatives.
Alongside these grassroots efforts, several key institutions play a vital role in preserving and promoting Hungary's heritage. The Hungarian Heritage House (Hagyományok Háza)[11] is a leading institution focusing on safeguarding folk traditions across the Carpathian Basin, offering workshops, training, and public education. The National Museum and other regional museums are central to preserving tangible heritage, collecting and restoring historical artifacts. Professional organizations like ICOMOS[12] Hungary and Europa Nostra Hungary also contribute to heritage conservation through expert advice and recognition programs.

THE VALUE SYSTEM BEHIND LOCAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

In Hungary, local heritage is widely interpreted as both a cultural asset and a civic responsibility. It plays a significant role in fostering national pride, identity, and continuity. Heritage is often framed as a legacy to be honored and preserved, with traditional practices celebrated as integral to the community's sense of self. The concept of Hungarikum is central to this – a designation for uniquely Hungarian products, traditions, and values officially recognized for their cultural significance. These include culinary traditions like Tokaj wine and Kalocsa paprika, as well as folk art, music, and regional festivals. These elements are not only symbols of pride but serve to unite generations and connect Hungarians to their shared history.
At the same time, newer interpretations of heritage emphasize diversity, critical reflection, and innovation. Local heritage is increasingly recognized as a tool for community development, youth engagement, and intercultural dialogue. While traditional narratives often romanticize Hungary's rural past, contemporary practices delve into untold stories, marginalized histories, and evolving identities. Heritage thus becomes a living, dynamic resource, capable of fostering social cohesion and intergenerational learning. It empowers communities to reflect on their histories, celebrate their cultural diversity, and engage with new, inclusive cultural practices. In this sense, Hungary's approach to local heritage is changing – combining tradition with innovation, and acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of its past.

[11] Hungarian Heritage House (Hagyományok Háza): About us. Retrieved June 30, 2025, from https://www.hagyomanyokhaza.hu/en
[12] ICOMOS Hungary: About ICOMOS Hungary. Retrieved June 30, 2025, from https://www.icomos.hu/en

CONFRONTING A COMPLICATED PAST: THE TRIANON LEGACY

The Treaty of Trianon in 1920 significantly reshaped Hungary's borders, leaving millions of ethnic Hungarians outside the country's new boundaries. This territorial loss and its cultural consequences are central to Hungary's national memory and are often referred to as the "Trianon trauma." While the impact of this event is still felt, Hungary has developed ways to address its legacy. June 4th is observed as the Day of National Unity, which emphasizes the shared cultural identity of Hungarian communities, regardless of national borders. Policies such as granting dual citizenship to ethnic Hungarians abroad aim to strengthen these connections.

Memorials and cultural expressions help keep the history of Trianon present in public consciousness. The National Memorial of Unity in Budapest commemorates the lost Hungarian settlements, and the Székely Himnusz (Székely Anthem) continues to be an important cultural symbol. These efforts help to preserve the memory of Trianon and maintain a sense of collective identity among Hungarians, both within the country and in communities abroad.

CONCLUSION: HERITAGE AND HUNGARIAN IDENTITY

Preserving local heritage is essential to the self-awareness of the Hungarian people. It connects generations and strengthens a sense of shared history. Festivals, songs, and traditions not only honor the past but also shape the country's collective identity. These living traditions are actively preserved and passed down, keeping heritage a vibrant part of everyday life. It is also reinforced by strong laws and cultural institutions, reflecting a national commitment to safeguard both tangible landmarks and intangible practices for future generations. Hungary's rich cultural heritage, showcased through its UNESCO World Heritage Sites like Hollókő and celebrated local traditions, helps distinguish the country on the global stage. "Hungaricum", a term for uniquely Hungarian products and traditions like Tokaj wine and Kalocsa paprika, highlights the pride Hungarians take in their cultural treasures. Shared cultural memory also bridges Hungarian communities across borders, providing a sense of unity amid historical challenges such as Trianon. In sum, preserving heritage in Hungary is not only about honoring the past; it is a living, unifying force shaping the nation's collective identity and guiding its future.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

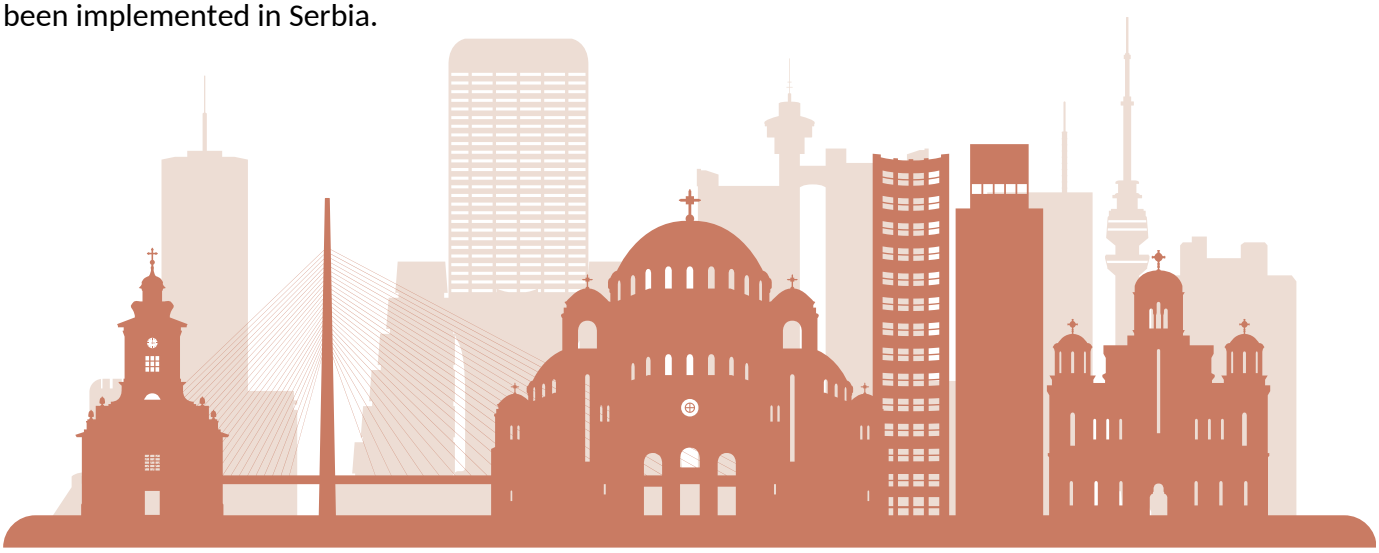
Serbia is known for its tradition, culture and cultural heritage, which is often understood in terms of material culture (monuments, traditional architecture, churches, crafts) and intangible elements (language dialects, music, rituals, folklore, rituals). Institutions in Serbia have formal mechanisms for the protection of cultural heritage, many initiatives come from local communities, youth organizations and citizens, and the first encounter with the protection of cultural heritage was Prince Aleksandar Karađorđević, on the proposal of Jovan Steria Popović, issued on February 22, 1844, the Decree on the prohibition of the demolition of old cities and their ruins, in agreement with the Soviet Union. The Ordinance on the Protection of Ancient Monuments is the first general act on the protection of cultural heritage in Serbia and represents one of the first modern general legal acts on monuments in 19th century Europe.

Thanks to the special efforts of the writer Milorad Panić-Surep (later the first director of the Institute), the Government of Serbia founded the Institute for the Protection and Scientific Study of Cultural Monuments of the National Republic of Serbia in 1947, with headquarters in Belgrade. In 1960, the Institute was renamed the Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments - Belgrade, in 1971 it was joined by the Yugoslav Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, and the organization of a network of protection institutions on the territory of Serbia soon began.

Serbia is very famous for the preservation of culture and tradition, and traditional dance-folklore. Srpsko kolo is a traditional Serbian dance that is on the UNESCO list of protected cultural assets. Kolo is a mirror of the Serbian people, which is performed at all the events of the Serbs throughout their lives. Customs differ by area, and each area has a very complex structure of customs, while events that were organized in the past are still represented in certain places.

There are various festivals and cultural events where folklore ensembles promote Serbian choreography, singing, and instrumental performances, so the "Sabor trubača u Guči" is one of the most visited music festivals with a strong folklore segment, while the "Vukov sabor u Tršiću" is the oldest cultural manifestation in Serbia.

Local heritage is relevant to the public, especially in rural areas where traditions and customs are practiced as before. In recent years, awareness of the need to preserve local customs, dialects, as well as folk singing, dancing and playing instruments has increased. Recently, many cultural assets digitization projects have been implemented in Serbia.



LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

At the beginning of 2021, the Ministry of Culture and Information defined Strategic Priorities for the Development of Culture in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-2025, which were approved by the Government of the Republic of Serbia. This document sets 20 key directions of cultural policy, with the aim of improving the cultural sector, strengthening awareness of cultural identity, introducing modern and innovative approaches to the transmission of cultural values, as well as encouraging cooperation with the educational, scientific and tourism sectors.

Among the strategic goals of Serbia's cultural policy, the following stand out: increasing budget funds for culture, preservation of cultural and historical heritage, intensive cooperation with UNESCO, development of modern museums and galleries, encouragement of art and the film industry, competitiveness in the media space, as well as decentralization of cultural production. Also, important priorities include the development of cultural diplomacy, the implementation and continuation of important infrastructure projects, cooperation with the private sector through public-private partnerships, as well as engagement with other relevant actors. It is also planned to introduce tax incentives for investment in culture, recognition of the economic dimension of culture, strengthening of popular culture, digitalization of cultural content and development of cultural tourism. Special emphasis was placed on improving the status of independent artists, cultural workers and professional associations of artists.

Serbia can boast of five sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List, which bear witness to the rich history, spirituality and cultural development of the Balkans:

- Stari Ras and Sopoćani (1979) - includes significant medieval monuments: the Sopoćani monastery, the St. George's Pillars monastery, the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, as well as the remains of the Ras fortress in Gradina.
- Studenica Monastery (1986) – one of the most important spiritual and artistic centers from the era of the Nemanjić dynasty.
- Gamzigrad - Romuliana, the palace of the Emperor Galerija (2007) - an exceptional archaeological site from the late Roman era.
- Medieval monuments in Kosovo* (2004) - a group entry that includes the monasteries of Dečani, Gračanica, the Patriarchate of Peć and the church of the Virgin of Ljeviška in Prizren. This entity is currently on the List of World Heritage in Danger.
- Stećci - medieval tombstones (2016) - a serial cross-border site that Serbia shares with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro.

So far, Serbia has entered five elements on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which depict living traditions and customs with a deep meaning for national identity:

- Slava - family celebration of the patron saint's day (2014)
- Kolo - a traditional folk game in a circle, a symbol of unity and collective spirit (2017)
- Singing to the Fiddle-An Epic Oral Heritage Passed Down Through the Generations (2018)
- Pottery making in Zlakusa - the technique of making vessels on the hand wheel cultivated in the village of Zlakusa (2020)
- Preparation and use of plum brandy - social practices and knowledge related to the traditional production of plum brandy (2022)

The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia takes care of the work of 28 national cultural institutions, which represent key carriers of the preservation and development of cultural heritage and contemporary creativity. Among them are:

-The Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, as the central institution for the professional protection of immovable cultural assets

- The National Museum of Serbia, the most important museum institution in the country
- The State Archives of Serbia, which includes a network of 36 public archives throughout the country
- The Archive of Yugoslavia, the custodian of the archives of the former common state
- The National Library of Serbia, which coordinates the work of a network of 164 public libraries
- The Yugoslav Cinematheque, an institution of special importance for the preservation of film heritage
- Film Center of Serbia, responsible for the development and promotion of domestic cinematography

COMMUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONS TO HERITAGE PRESERVATION

Serbian cultural heritage is a unique blend of multiple traditions and narratives: Slavic (South Slavic cultural interweaving), Byzantine (Orthodox Christianity, medieval churches and monasteries, the cult of Saint Sava, the Cyrillic script), ancient Balkan (architectural styles, musical, linguistic, and culinary heritage under Oriental-Islamic influence), heroic (the culture of peasant-warriors and heroes in numerous uprisings and armed struggles, both real and mythical representations of national and state history), national-romantic (folklore, oral traditions, songs, stories, legends, productive and family-based rural traditions), and enlightened-European (ideals of rationality, modernity, and enlightenment, represented by the bourgeois intelligentsia, artists, and scientists).

Thus, Serbia's cultural heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible assets from various historical periods, including elements of elite and folk culture, with a clear awareness of its connection to the achievements of other peoples with whom Serbs have come into contact throughout history, as well as the cultural heritage of national minorities living in Serbia today.

Since tangible and intangible heritage are intertwined, they intersect the entire social fabric of a people. Therefore, the architectural tradition in Serbia can be understood as a reflection of very specific social (economic, cultural, political) values, symbols, and meanings. Numerous cultural buildings and spaces not only indicate the architectural characteristics of a particular historical period, but also the fundamental principles that governed public life at the time—namely, the values that individuals and entire communities adhered to.

This is evident both in medieval Serbian churches and monasteries, and in the memorial architecture and numerous monuments related to the legacy of the national liberation struggle and the post-war reconstruction of the country during the era of Yugoslav socialism. The preservation of cultural heritage in Serbia is very prevalent in all local communities, however, it differs by geographical location and by customs and traditions. Ministries, institutes, museums, and archives carry out expert work in research, conservation, and education, guided by laws and international conventions, including the FARO Convention and UNESCO standards. These institutions classify heritage (e.g., as monuments of exceptional importance), propose protective measures, and often work on the restoration of sites in collaboration with architects, historians, and archaeologists.

Key National Institutions:

1.Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia
2.Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia (Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture Srbije)
3.Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments
4.Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities (Vojvodina)
5.Regional Institutes for the Protection of Cultural Monuments
– Located in cities such as Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kraljevo, Zaječar, Subotica, Kragujevac, and others.
6.National Museum in Belgrade
7.Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade
8.Museum of Vojvodina
9.Matica Srpska
– One of the oldest cultural and scientific institutions in Serbia, plays a significant role in archiving, publishing, and cultural education related to Serbian heritage.
10.Archives of Serbia and regional archives
Commission for UNESCO (Serbian National Commission for UNESCO)

THE VALUE SYSTEM BEHIND LOCAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Serbia has committed to a value-based approach to heritage by signing the FARO Convention, which emphasizes that cultural heritage belongs to everyone and should be used to promote democracy, participation, and community well-being. This has helped shape how public institutions, private organizations, and communities in Serbia understand and manage their cultural heritage today.
Cultural heritage in Serbia is closely tied to a wide range of historical, cultural, spiritual, and social values. It reflects the country's complex past and its efforts to build an inclusive and creative future. Heritage is not just about preserving old buildings or customs—it is also about identity, dialogue, education, and development. Some of the key heritage values in Serbia include:

National identity and continuity

Medieval monasteries like Studenica and Sopoćani, the Battle of Kosovo (1389), and the legacy of the Nemanjić dynasty are seen as symbols of national pride and historical roots. The Middle Ages has a close connection with the national identity of Serbia because it is a period of a specific spiritual-historical context, which played an important role in developing awareness of the importance of the past, and therefore of the national heritage.

Cultural tradition and pride

Practices like Slava (UNESCO Intangible Heritage), traditional folk music, dance (e.g., kolo), and handcrafted items like Pirot carpets are celebrated for their authenticity and connection to everyday life.

Historical memory

Heritage sites from WWII and the Yugoslav period, such as Kadinjača, serve as reminders of shared struggles, resistance, and resilience.

Religious and spiritual significance

Monasteries like Žiča, Ostrog, and Gračanica play a key role in Serbian Orthodox tradition and spiritual life.

Local identity

Heritage helps people feel connected to their region through local festivals, dialects, and culinary traditions like the Leskovac grill or Vojvodina paprika dishes.

Intercultural coexistence

Especially in places like Vojvodina, heritage reflects the rich mix of ethnic groups—Hungarians, Roma, Slovaks, Bosniaks, Albanians—through multilingual signage, religious diversity, and minority festivals.

Sustainable tourism

Heritage supports local development through ethno-villages (like Drvengrad), wine routes, and cultural tourism, often backed by EU and UNESCO programs.

Education and civic engagement

Schools, museums, and youth programs use heritage to teach tolerance, history, and cultural awareness, encouraging young people to explore and protect their own heritage.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF LOCAL HERITAGE IN SERBIAN IDENTITY

Local heritage plays a key role in shaping and expressing the identity of Serbs. It represents a rich history, customs and values that are passed down from generation to generation, connecting people to their roots and community. From ancient monasteries and traditional music to folk dances and customary celebrations, the local heritage preserves Serbia's unique cultural complexity. In many Serbian towns and villages, local heritage is a source of pride and a sense of belonging, strengthening the sense of community and continuity. It consolidates collective memory and helps individuals understand their place in a larger historical and cultural context.

Local heritage contributes to the cultural diversity of Serbia, emphasizing regional specificities, while at the same time nurturing common national values. It is the foundation for cultural education and tourism development, thereby strengthening local economies and contributing to cultural diplomacy.

In the end, the preservation of local heritage is necessary for the maintenance of Serbian identity, because it allows the past to remain a living part of the present and the future.

A recent example of Serbia's creative approach to heritage is Novi Sad being accepted into the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in 2023 in the field of Media Arts—the first city in Southeast Europe to receive this recognition. This highlights Serbia's dedication to using culture and innovation as tools for sustainable urban development.

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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

Cultural heritage and tradition play a significant role in shaping identity and cultural policy. Heritage – as expressed in the term “Heimat” – provides a sense of belonging and a shared history between individuals and communities. It shapes their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Providing a tangible link to the past and fostering a sense of belonging to a place can promote the acceptance for sustainable practices. Importantly, local heritage is framed not as a static relic of the past, but as a dynamic, living resource that connects people to their environment and history. Incorporating local heritage into educational programs as well as sustainable developments can enhance cultural understanding and thus lead to a more resilient future.

The concepts of Heimat and tradition have often been appropriated by right-wing nationalist groups and parties, most prominently the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to promote exclusionary narratives and a racially charged, static understanding of cultural identity. Such strategies of “othering” rely on nostalgic and ethnically homogeneous visions of national belonging, and have intensified in recent years alongside the broader rise of far-right populist movements across Europe.

In post-1945 Germany the term “Heimat” has been long avoided due to its instrumentalization during the Nazi era, similarly to the use of the national flag. Only in 2006, with the FIFA World Cup being held in Germany, the use of the flag as well as feeling a proudness connected to its own country have slowly become more acceptable in the broader population. Both political and civil actors have worked to shape a more inclusive and connecting vision of cultural heritage and most importantly redefining Heimat in democratic, pluralistic terms. It includes recognizing its emotional and cultural dimensions while detaching it from nationalist ideology. Accordingly, the Federal Ministry of the Interior in the past German government 2021 – 2024 included the word “Heimat” in its official German title (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat). The Ministry stated: “Heimat is where people feel comfortable, accepted and secure. Heimat is not

about narrowness, but gives orientation."The symbolic and strategic move seeks to reclaim Heimat from far-right appropriation and cultivate it instead as a space of diversity, civic solidarity, and democratic exchange – reinforced in public institutions and UNESCO´s promotion of Intangible Cultural Heritage as tools for social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

Relatedly, a central aspect of "Heimat" and heritage in Germany is its commemorative culture, which is also central to the country´s democratic self-understanding. Rooted in the national effort to confront the legacy of National Socialism, it reinforces the commitment to a free and democratic constitutional order. With over 300 memorial sites across the country, remembrance is largely implemented at the region level, making historical responsibility part of everyday life. Local memory cultures also evolved around the division of Germany and the GDR past, especially in the eastern federal states. In recent years, growing attention has been paid to neglected aspects of Germany`s history, such as the colonial history and its migration society. This evolving landscape underscores the idea that a working democracy requires historical awareness and inclusivity.

THE REGULATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Germany's federal structure results in a multi-level legal system for heritage protection, with regulations in place at national, state, European, and international levels. Local heritage is primarily governed by state laws, but these are shaped by broader national and supranational frameworks.

At the federal level, the most relevant legislative piece is the Act on the Protection of Cultural Property (Kulturgutschutzgesetz, KGSG), enacted in 2016 and providing the overarching legal framework. It aligns German law with international agreements, especially the 1970 UNESCO Convention, and regulates the import, export, and protection of cultural goods. While focused on movable heritage, the KGSG influences state-level legislation in monument preservation. The law not only severs to manage cultural assets administratively, but affirms their value as embodiments of historical memory and identity. By imposing strict conditions on the movement of cultural property and introducing national heritage lists, the KGSG aims to prevent the loss of culturally significant objects, combat trafficking, and ensure that items of cultural heritage remain accessible and preserved for future generations. The law reflects the principle that cultural heritage requires a distinctive and proactive form of protection, grounded in ethical responsibility.

The most prominent legislative piece on the state level is the "Denkmalschutzgesetz" (Monument Protection Act), governing immovable cultural heritage such as historic buildings, archaeological sites, and cultural landscapes. These laws define criteria for listing monuments and regulate restoration and demolition. They endow state authorities with considerable decision-making power arguing that monuments are important expressions of regional identity, fostering public engagement, and promoting education and continuity. Therefore, related laws and regulations have an immediate effect on urban development and city planning by restricting new construction in historic districts, influencing building design to ensure architectural compatibility, and requiring heritage impact assessments in planning procedures. Through this power, monument protection shapes the character of cities and towns, balancing modern needs with historical continuity. The aim is to preserve regional identity while integrating cultural heritage into contemporary life and foster public engagement with history. Thanks to its federal structure, the individual states can tailor its laws to reflect its unique situation – ensuring a nuanced and locally grounded approach to heritage governance.

Ever since joining the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, German authorities are highly engaged in creating a national inventory of intangible cultural heritage ("Bundesweites Verzeichnis Immatrielles Kulturerbe") that recognizes creative, inclusive and innovative forms of culture. It shows examples of living cultural traditions and forms of expression that are practised and passed on in Germany. Following the slogan "Wissen. Können. Weitergeben." ("Knowlegde. Ability. Passing on.") the national inventory is supposed to strengthen appreciation and recognition of traditional knowledge and skills. It differentiates six categories:

(1)customs and festivals throughout the year,
(2)traditional handicraft techniques,
(3)traditions and life in the community,
(4)people and nature,
(5)music and performing arts and
(6)model conservation programs.

Decisions on new listings are made regularly in a multi-stage process. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Cultural Affairs of the federal states holds a list of proposals. These proposals are examined, evaluated and recommended by the independent Expert Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is based at the German Commission for UNESCO. In addition to the national inventory some federal states have their own registers. (cf. Deutsche UNESCO-Kommission[13]).

Germany has a well-developed network of public and private institutions dedicated to the preservation and conservation of local heritage. These institutions operate at either federal, state, or municipal levels and reflect a long-standing commitment to cultural heritage as a public good.

At the national level, the German National Committee for Monument Protection (DNK) promotes awareness and coordination in heritage policy. Each federal state has its own State Office for Monument Preservation (Landesamt für Denkmalpflege), responsible for identifying, documenting, and protecting heritage under state law. In the private sector, the German Foundation for Monument Protection (DSD) plays a major role, especially in supporting smaller, community-based projects. These institutions collaborate with local authorities, churches, and citizens to preserve both tangible and intangible heritage. In each federal state there is an abundance of smaller private institutions concerning themselves with cultural heritage and monument preservation. Museums, e.g. the so-called Landesmuseen(state museums) and Art Institutions additionally play a significant role in the conservation of cultural heritage in Germany.

[13] https://www.unesco.de/

THE VALUE SYSTEM BEHIND LOCAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

While the cultural heritage is regarded as an vital element for the identity and social cohesion in Germany, German institutions and the German population is very cautious with publicly displaying or thematising their cultural heritage. This is due to the experiences in the “Third Reich”, the Holocaust and the Second World War. Therefore, all public institutions and all cultural heritage projects that were researched during this inquiry strongly highlighted that discussions and projects on German cultural heritage take always place on the grounds of the “free and democratic basic order” of the German “Basic Law” (Grundgesetz). This fundamentally finds its expression in Art. 1 of the German Basic Law (the Dignity of Men is unimpeachable) and its “principle of democracy” including the equal participation of all citizens in the democratic process (participation), the sovereignty of the people, and the “Rule of Law”.

This basic attitude towards its own cultural heritage is well reflected in the mission statement of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States (Kulturstiftung der Länder): „The Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States defends cultural diversity as a hallmark of humanity and our shared human heritage. In the firm belief that cultural diversity can only flourish in the context of democracy, tolerance, social justice and mutual respect among societies and cultures, the Cultural Foundation recognises the equal value of all cultures and their cultural forms of expression, including cultures of individuals belonging to minorities. In accordance with the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States unconditionally affirms freedom of arts and sciences, research and teaching as well as the Länder’s authority over culture.”[14]

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF LOCAL HERITAGE IN GERMAN IDENTITY

Local heritage conservation plays a vital role in shaping the self-awareness and identity of the German people. While the term “local heritage” is not widely used, the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage – such as historic sites, regional traditions, and commemorative practices – has become central to Germany`s democratic and cultural self-understanding.

Given Germany`s complex history, especially the legacy of National Socialism and the GDR, heritage in Germany is closely tied to remembrance, inclusion, and civic responsibility. Efforts to redefine historically burdened terms like Heimat reflect a broader shift towards a more national-centric yet democratic and divers definition of the term.

Institutions across all levels promote heritage as a living resource that fosters belonging, supports education and sustainability, and strengthens community identity. In this way, local heritage is not only about preserving the past – it is about shaping a shared, resilient future.

[14] https://www.kulturstiftung.de/cultural-foundation-of-the-german-federal-states/ viewd on July 15th, 2025

4. Conclusion

So, being a newcomer to the world of cultural heritage what should we remember when we are about to start an own local heritage project by developing a local heritage tour?

WHAT IS LOCAL (CULTURAL) HERITAGE?

First and foremost, you can confidently apply a broad understanding of local cultural heritage. The term is neither restricted to tangible (buildings, monuments, pieces of art, etc.) nor to intangible (cultural practices, traditions, music, etc.) heritage. The EYES-project applies the following definition which corresponds to the definition of the “Cambridge Dictionary”:

Definition Cultural Heritage:
Heritage features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings, that were created in the past and are still important.

Possible subject for cultural heritage investigations[15]:

- Tangible Heritage – for example buildings, monuments, artefacts, clothing, artwork, books, machines, historic towns, archaeological sites;
- Intangible Heritage – for example language and oral traditions, sports and games, performing arts, social practices and traditional craftmanship;
- Natural Heritage – for example landscapes, flora and fauna;
- Digital Heritage – for example resources that were created in digital form (like digital art or animation) or that have been digitalised for preservation.

[15] European School Education Platform: https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/discover/tutorials/learn-connect-and-reflect-cultural-heritage viewed on July 15th, 2025

This definition Accordingly, if you intend to engage in a local heritage project but do not know which topic to choose the first step may be to take look around in one's own community and identify things or issues that are important to the people and that have their roots somewhere in the past.
In any case the developers of local heritage projects should be aware of the potential positive effects and pay some attention to framework conditions that should apply for these positive effects to materialise.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT OF A LOCAL HERITAGE PROJECT?

Dealing with cultural local heritage is a global issue that is recognised for its identity-forming potential. By dealing with cultural heritage Individuals become aware of their own roots and realise that they are part of a community. Therewith, people become more self-aware which gives them a form of orientation and stability. Becoming aware of one's own local heritage can also have positive effects for the entire community. Bringing a community's common cultural heritage to light and discovering commonalities and common features of individuals most probably leads to stronger bonds among the community members what fosters community members' sense of belonging and sympathy for each other. This improves, in the end, their well-being and satisfaction with their everyday life.
In any case, by recognising behavioural patterns of one's own past as well as the past of one's own community can function as a strong source of orientation for the future. By knowing what was positive and negative in the past can lead to better decisions in the future. Therefore, good knowledge of local cultural heritage can be the source of sustainable future development.
Eventually, researching cultural heritage is a multidimensional task that requires manifold skills that need to be acquired along the research process. This contains literature search techniques, archival research techniques, interview techniques, presentation techniques including managing multimedia forms of expressions, as well as basic knowledge and/or skills in the substantial context that is investigated to name just a few. Accordingly, "Cultural Awareness and Expression" is one of eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.[16]

[16] European School Education Platform: https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/discover/tutorials/learn-connect-and-reflect-cultural-heritage viewed on July 15th, 2025

THE VALUE SYSTEM BEHIND LOCAL (CULTURAL) HERITAGE PROJECTS

Overemphasizing one's own local heritage can, however, also constrain individuals' perspectives. If an increased sense of belonging comes with an active demarcation from and a devaluation of other communities the devotion to the own cultural heritage may lead to conflict between communities and cultures. In order not to go down that path, the consciousness and the value system of the cultural heritage projects are decisive.
Accordingly, if you intend to engage in a cultural heritage project, make sure to follow these fundamental value-specific guidelines:

Value-specific guidelines for local cultural heritage projects:

- View your own local cultural heritage from a pluralistic, tolerant, and human-rights centred perspective. All cultures – just as as all human beings – have a legitimate right of existence which needs to be recognised. They should not be regarded as a danger or a threat to one's own culture but a source for learning and development.

- Avoid biases when dealing with your own local cultural heritage. This means recognising dark spots of the own local heritage and not focusing only on the success stories. Only then will we be able not to repeat the mistakes and failures of our ancestors.

If these two baseline rules are taken seriously, dealing with cultural heritage can become a deeply integrating force in which no culture needs to fear of being cancelled or dominated. This opens the path not only to better intercultural communication but to a healthy and confident self-assessment of communities and their individual members.
Fortunately, it seems to be the case that in all partner countries of this project embrace this attitude which was prominently put forward in the Faro Convention by the Council of Europe. All countries seem to tackle their sometimes complicated history may this be National Socialism in Germany, the Trianon legacy in Hungary, occupation and foreign rule in Poland, or ethnic tensions in Belgium.
It is to be hoped that this tendency which has different manifestations in the different countries is strong enough to become the norm in dealing with the many European cultures and to proceed to understand it as a force for self-development instead of division and national hybris.