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# Questioning Cultural Security

## How Being Awarded as Intangible Cultural Heritage Affects the Social Customs and Festivals of the Lusatian Sorbs

THERESA JACOBS, FABIAN JACOBS, INES KELLER

### Abstract:

In 2014, the national minority of the Lusatian Sorbs, with its “Social customs and festivals throughout the year”, was included in the first listing of the German UNESCO commission’s Nationwide Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The applicants hoped that this inclusion would strengthen the minority’s political position and make it more visible to the public. Based on these expectations from the Sorbian side, the article deals on the one hand with reactions to the application and how the Sorbs dealt with it. It examines the opportunities the listing opened up for cultural policy representatives of the minority and the impact the entry had on the bearers of cultural practices. On the other hand, a critical academic reflection is undertaken on the after-effects of the entry concerning the production of “cultural security”. This is intended to emphasise the important role that research perspectives relevant to minorities play in dealing with the demand for the transfer of knowledge into practice.

*Keywords: Sorbs, minority, cultural security, Lusatia, intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO, cultural policy, cultural practice*

Following Germany’s ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, Domowina – the umbrella organisation of Sorbian associations and also the minority political representation of the Lusatian Sorbs – received an official request from the Saxon Ministry of Science and the Arts to apply as a group of heritage representatives for the designation of a cultural practice as “Intangible Cultural Heritage” (hereinafter ICH).<sup>1</sup> The Domowina’s leadership, consisting of an elected Federal Board of 30 members, its chairman and a head office, was happy to accept this proposal, which in their eyes offered opportunities primarily in terms of minority policy. From the outset,

1 Škoda, Clemens: Požadanie wo zapisanje serbskeho imaterielneho kulturneho herbstwa na lisčinu imaterielneho kulturneho herbstwa UNESCO. Doporučenja a džěłowa koncepcija. Budyšin 2013, p. 2.

these were strongly linked both to the expansion of cultural policy opportunities at federal and international level and to the strengthening of practical cultural projects.<sup>2</sup> After a relatively short application process, in which the institutionally broad-based Domowina, as the voice of civil society, worked closely with the Sorbian Institute as scientific advisor, as early as November 2014, the “Social customs and festivals of the Sorbs throughout the year” were included as one of the first forms of cultural expression in the German UNESCO commission’s Nationwide Inventory of the ICH.<sup>3</sup>

To contextualise the application procedure, a short excursion into the Sorbs’ current situation is useful. The Sorbs live as a recognised national minority in Germany, whose traditional area of settlement – Lusatia – extends into the two federal states of Saxony and Brandenburg.<sup>4</sup> A look at various European regions such as Brittany, Wales, Frisia, Carinthia or Grisons in Switzerland, where so-called autochthonous minorities with historical roots in the region live today, shows that their settlement areas are often rural, peripheral or border regions.<sup>5</sup> What these autochthonous minorities often have in common is that they were once majorities with closed cultural and linguistic areas. Social transformations, especially during the era of industrialisation but also nationalist language policies, led to assimilation processes and they became a minority in their areas of settlement.

In Lusatia, this assimilation process has been particularly marked by industrial open-cast lignite mining, which began at the end of the 19th century<sup>6</sup> – a time when the majority of rural Lusatia still spoke Sorbian. Since then, open-cast mining has claimed a third of the settlement area by demolishing villages and devastating entire stretches of land. This, together with the influx of non-Sorbian-speaking industrial workers, acted as a catalyst for assimilation.<sup>7</sup> The loss of spaces to use the minority language – in addition to work, church, school and home – can be seen as decisive factors in this process.

The Sorbs, estimated to number around 60,000 today, are politically represented by the Domowina, which was founded in 1912. The Domowina has over 7,000 individual members, who are organised in regional and local associations, local groups as well as supra-regional associations. They are held together by a full-time umbrella structure.<sup>8</sup> It was the Domowina that wanted to submit the application for the ICH for the entire settlement area. In order not to exclude anyone in the search for a cultural practice representative of all Sorbs, the idea was devel-

2 Ibid.

3 Deutsche UNESCO-Kommission (ed.): Bundesweites Verzeichnis Immaterielles Kulturerbe – Jubiläumsausgabe. Bonn 2023, p. 57, [www.unesco.de/sites/default/files/2023-06/IKE\\_Verzeichnis\\_2023\\_web.pdf](http://www.unesco.de/sites/default/files/2023-06/IKE_Verzeichnis_2023_web.pdf), 13. 3. 2024.

4 Scholze, Dietrich: Sorben. In: Franz Schön, id. (eds.): Sorbisches Kulturlexikon. Bautzen 2014, pp. 368–370, here p. 370.

5 Bresan, Peter; Jacobs, Fabian (eds.): Lausitz / Łužyca / Łužica. Die Sorben/Wenden verbinden die Lausitz. Ed. by Zukunftswerkstatt Lausitz. Bad Muskau 2020, p. 25.

6 Förster, Frank: Verschwundene Dörfer im Lausitzer Braunkohlenrevier. Bautzen 2014.

7 Bresan (note 5), p. 7.

8 Bresan, Annett: Domowina. In: Franz Schön, Dietrich Scholze (eds.): Sorbisches Kulturlexikon. Bautzen 2014, pp. 102–107, here p. 106.

oped to apply for the ICH title not with a single practice, but with the multitude of the very diverse and regionally specific customs and festivals throughout the year.<sup>9</sup> These include winter customs such as the Shrovetide custom of Zapust and Easter customs and church festivals such as the Easter ride. There is the maypole, which is common in the whole traditional area of settlement of the Sorbs, and the St. John's Day Ride, which is only practised in one place in Lusatia. They range from harvest customs such as rooster plucking to the Christ Child during Advent. The project, which covers the entire Sorbian settlement area of Lusatia, was also submitted as an inter-state application.

## Expecting Political Recognition: The Application Process

As Regina Bendix pointed out, cultural heritage has inherent dimensions of value creation that are caught between political, social and economic uses.<sup>10</sup> In the specific context of minorities in their asymmetrical and vulnerable relationship with the majority society, an ICH status offers clear advantages and opportunities such as increased visibility and political weight, but also risks, such as an unintended loss of intimacy or a possible uncontrolled commercialisation and touristification of the cultural heritage, which always need to be examined in detail. In this context, the aspect of "cultural security" is becoming increasingly important. This is a buzzword that has become particularly popular in political sciences in recent years in relation to the protection of human needs as well as cultural assets in armed conflicts.<sup>11</sup> Applied to our research on ethnic and linguistic minorities, it is an analytical tool for assessing the sustainability and future viability of community development. Accordingly, the cultural security to be sought means "societal and institutional frameworks that should be designed to facilitate the expression of cultural otherness and political participation and, at the same time, allow national and linguistic minorities to be a part and a counterpart of the society in different state contexts".<sup>12</sup>

In addition to state stability and an institutional and territorial dimension, the provision of collective identity and participatory elements are crucial to ensure the cultural security of minority communities. After the following overview of the application process and the subsequent significant impact on the funding policy

9 Keller, Ines; Jacobs, Fabian; Jacobs, Theresa: Immaterielles Kulturerbe und die Sorben – Die Chance auf einen neuen Umgang mit kulturellem Erbe. In: Elka Tschernokoshewa, Ines Keller, Fabian Jacobs (eds.): Einheit in Verschiedenheit. Kulturelle Diversität und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe von Minderheiten auf dem Prüfstand. Münster, New York 2015, pp. 87–101, here p. 93.

10 Bendix, Regina: Kulturelles Erbe zwischen Wirtschaft und Politik: Ein Ausblick. In: Dorothee Hemme, Markus Tauschek, id. (eds.): Prädikat HERITAGE. Wertschöpfungen aus kulturellen Ressourcen. Berlin 2007, pp. 337–356.

11 Carbonneau, Jean-Rémi; Gruschke, Andreas; Jacobs, Fabian; Keller, Ines: Introduction. A Multidisciplinary Approach to Cultural Security in Minority Studies. In: id. (eds.): Dimensions of Cultural Security. Bruxelles etc. 2021 (2017), pp. 35–58, here pp. 37–40.

12 Ibid., p. 39.

framework, we will discuss the dimensions of collective identity and participation with regard to the impact of the ICH listing on the Sorbian community. It is assumed that the exercise of cultural practices in a minority context is, on the one hand, a matter to be negotiated by cultural policy representatives within the majority society. On the other hand, it is an important means of generating self-assurance in everyday life and of constructing a collective identity.<sup>13</sup>

The application was primarily managed and submitted by the leadership of the Domowina. Clemens Škoda, the Domowina's cultural officer, approached the Sorbian Institute in June 2013 with a request for advice and support in the application process. By October 2013, one of us authors from the Sorbian Institute was to prepare the necessary application texts and compile a comprehensive, but not exhaustive list of Sorbian customs and festivals that are currently practised throughout the year. This list was later submitted as an attachment to the application but did not become part of the entry. In order to record the 30 or so different customs, the leadership of the regional associations of the Domowina were involved, so that both the whole of Upper and Lower Lusatia could be adequately represented and, ultimately, to meet the participatory requirements of the process envisaged by the German UNESCO Commission:<sup>14</sup> "We knew there was little time. If we had held regional conferences or made it completely public, we would never have been able to keep the schedule. So we mainly involved regional experts – mediated by the regional structures of Domowina – rather than the general public. In this way, our member associations, and therefore the grassroots, were involved. This was a good intermediate step. Because we had already decided to include all the customs, we did not have to exclude anyone", said Clemens Škoda, reflecting on the application phase in an interview in 2019.<sup>15</sup> This was preceded by several changes to the forms of cultural expressions that would eventually be submitted.<sup>16</sup>

Four of the five regional associations submitted very extensive contributions, which also showed their support for the application. At its meeting in November 2013, the Federal Executive Board, as the highest elected body of Domowina, finally decided to submit the application together with the compiled list with general descriptions of the customs and festivals and their regional distribution in Lusatia. After a long and quite controversial discussion, the proposal was unanimously approved. The controversy was not directed against the actual text of the proposal but focused on the forms of expression included in the list. Catholic Sorbs questioned whether customs closely associated with their denomination (e.g. Corpus Christi) should be included, as they were particularly concerned about the marketing and commercialisation of Sorbian culture.<sup>17</sup> The criteria that the Sorbian costume is

13 Jacobs, Theresa; Keller, Ines: The Sorbs in Germany: Cultural Practices and Cultural Security. In: Carbonneau et al. (note 11), pp. 421–443.

14 Keller/Jacobs/Jacobs (note 9), p. 93.

15 Škoda, Clemens: Interview with Theresa Jacobs and Ines Keller. Bautzen, 17. 1. 2019. Quotes from Škoda translated from Sorbian by the authors.

16 Rječnica, Milenka: Katalog 33 natožkow zdžěta. Serbja a swětowe kulturne herbstwo UNESCO. In: Serbske Nowiny, 6. 11. 2013, pp. 1–2.

17 Jacobs, Theresa; Keller, Ines: Immaterielles Kulturerbe und die Sorben. Herausforderungen und Chan-

worn and Sorbian is spoken by the participants when practising the religious customs were ultimately decisive for the majority of the Domowina Federal Executive Board in favour of keeping them on the list: “Such a title enables us to promote the Sorbian culture and language in a cultural-political way. [...] If intangible cultural heritage is thought of in any way at the federal level, then the federal government is de facto politically recognising the exceptional position of the Sorbian language and culture. We were counting on that!”, says Škoda.<sup>18</sup>

In the period between the submission and the decision on the listing in the German Nationwide Inventory of ICH, Domowina carried out media-effective public relations work, which was strategically aimed at promoting the submission nationally, as well as informing the community and gaining grassroots support. In October 2014, the World Congress of the Conseil International des Organisations de Festivals de Folklore et d’Arts Traditionnels (CIOFF) took place in Bautzen. As the world organisation of folklore festivals, the CIOFF is in official partnership with UNESCO. Domowina has been a member of its German section since 2010. Membership came about through the organisation of the biennial “International Folklore Festival Lusatia”, which is attended by Sorbian ensembles as well as groups from other minorities from all over the world. The main theme of the World Congress in Bautzen was the preservation of the ICH, which was discussed by more than 200 participants from 51 countries. In addition to other presentations, the Sorbian application was presented and thus placed on an international podium.<sup>19</sup> The Sorbian Museum in Bautzen and the Wendish Museum in Cottbus/Chóšebuz provided expert opinions on the application, both of which emphasised the opportunities that recognition could provide for the Sorbian language as a cultural asset at state, national and international level. It could also be recognised as a potential source of identity for the Sorbs themselves.<sup>20</sup> Overall, this could have a positive effect on the preservation, maintenance and development of Sorbian culture, “promoting tolerance between Sorbs and Germans” that is always necessary for peaceful coexistence in the region, and “enriching cultural diversity”.<sup>21</sup>

In December 2014, the “Social customs and festivals of the Lusatian Sorbs throughout the year” were included in the German UNESCO commission’s Nationwide Inventory of ICH, along with 26 other cultural forms. In 2015 a scientific article was published by us authors of the Sorbian Institute, in which we not only described the application process, but also reflected our role of academic research in it. However, the article also pointed out the opportunities for a new approach to the cultural heritage of the Sorbian community resulting from the focus on intan-

cen für Kulturpolitik und Wissenschaft. In: Daniel Drascek, Helmut Groschwitz, Gabriele Wolf (eds.): Kulturerbe als kulturelle Praxis – Kulturerbe in der Beratungspraxis. München 2022, pp. 193–213, here p. 197.

18 Škoda, Interview (note 15).

19 Ratajczak, Cordula; Wowčer, Janek: Kulturne herbstwo zachować. Ministerka von Schorlemer zaangażement Serbow w CIOFF chwaliła. In: Serbske Nowiny, 23. 10. 2014, p. 1.

20 Unpublished letter of recommendation from the Wendish Museum in Cottbus 23. 10. 2013 and the Sorbian Museum in Bautzen dated 15. 11. 2013.

21 Letter of recommendation (note 20), p. 1. Translated from the German by the authors.

gible cultural heritage, which is expressed in UNESCO documents in the growing awareness of living culture, cultural diversity and the body as a medium as well as in the highlighted role of minorities and indigenous groups in the context of ICH.<sup>22</sup>

## Sudden Windfall for the Sorbian Cultural Policy

While public interest quickly waned in the immediate aftermath of the listing and there was hardly any activity apart from efforts to document the customs on film, the entry suddenly became relevant in the context of the German government's decision to phase out lignite power generation in 2017 and the resulting process of structural change. As a result, there has been a significant expansion and differentiation of funding opportunities throughout Lusatia, some of which Sorbian cultural policy actors have strategically tapped into with the label of the ICH award.

The Sorbian settlement area lies in the middle of lignite deposits and had lost around a third of its settlement area to open-cast lignite mining. The decision to abandon coal marked a turning point. The signs of the Sorbian narrative of shrinkage, loss and consequent cultural insecurity were reversed in favour of new prospects for the preservation and revitalisation of language and culture, particularly in Sorbian Lower Lusatia – the region most affected by open-cast lignite mining.<sup>23</sup>

The so-called Coal Commission, a 28-member body from politics, academia, business, environmental organisations and civil society, that was set up by the German government specifically to plan for this structural change, published its final report in early 2019, including an annex with possible measures for managing structural change. This annex was drawn up in consultation with the individual state governments, which also enabled the Sorbs to launch several project ideas for measures to promote Sorbian culture in open-cast mining areas.<sup>24</sup> A project proposal submitted via Brandenburg, entitled “Valorisation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in the German-Slavic Context”<sup>25</sup> was identified as worthy of funding by the Federal Ministry of Culture and received 1.5 million Euros as part of an immediate action programme for 2019 to 2021.<sup>26</sup>

The Sorbian entry in the German UNESCO commission's Nationwide Inventory of ICH is mentioned in the project profile as an important starting point for the joint project of the Domowina, the regional museums and the Sorbian Institute and served as a door opener in the project title. However, only one of the sub-projects

22 Keller/Jacobs/Jacobs (note 9), p. 99.

23 Jacobs, Fabian: Cultural Security in Post-mining Landscapes: The Case of the Sorbs in Middle Lusatia. In: Carbonneau et al. (note 11), pp. 201–229.

24 Commission “Wachstum, Strukturwandel und Beschäftigung”. Final report of 26th January 2019, [www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Wirtschaft/abschlussbericht-kommission-wachstum-strukturwandel-und-beschaefigung.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=1](http://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Wirtschaft/abschlussbericht-kommission-wachstum-strukturwandel-und-beschaefigung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1), 13. 3. 2024.

25 Ibid., p. 184.

26 Serbski institut/Sorbisches Institut: Inwertsetzung des immateriellen Kulturerbes im deutsch-slawischen Kontext, 2021, [www.serbski-institut.de/projekte-zentrale-vorhaben/inwertsetzung-des-immateriellen-kulturerbes-im-deutsch-slawischen-kontext](http://www.serbski-institut.de/projekte-zentrale-vorhaben/inwertsetzung-des-immateriellen-kulturerbes-im-deutsch-slawischen-kontext), 13. 3. 2024.

was specifically focused on the entry: between 2019 and 2021, the Sorbian Institute carried out a systematic survey of Sorbian customs and festivals throughout the year in a sub-region of Lusatia. Around 500 customs and festivals in the Spree-Neisse region were recorded using questionnaires and media surveys. The results of the project have been made available online on the knowledge portal of the Sorbian Institute SORABICON in March 2022.<sup>27</sup> Additionally an explanatory video on Sorbian cultural heritage was produced as part of the project, which also refers to the UNESCO ICH Convention.<sup>28</sup> The other sub-projects were mainly dedicated to the documentation and processing of Lower Sorbian literature and material culture as well as the establishment of institutional structures beyond the cultural practice of the honoured heritage. For example, the Sorbian non-profit company with limited liability, Domowina Niederlausitz Projekt gGmbH, was founded to develop cultural tourism offers and to establish points of contact for the cultural and creative industries. In addition, an existing network of regional museums and heritage centres has been expanded.<sup>29</sup> The planned documentation and digital accessibility of Sorbian cultural heritage was seen as a prerequisite for cultural practitioners and cultural economy actors to be able to use the processed cultural heritage for valorisation processes.

The alliance of project partners established in this first funding phase until 2021 was further differentiated in the second funding phase, which began in 2022 and is scheduled to run until 2031. The sub-project managed by the non-profit limited company will continue to operate under the name “Valorisation of Intangible Cultural Heritage”.<sup>30</sup> The project page refers to the 2014 listing: “Since 2014, Sorbian customs have been recognised as part of Germany’s Intangible Cultural Heritage. Sorbian culture, especially multilingualism, has hardly been exploited economically beyond traditional folklore. Existing tourism and cultural providers generally lack the resources (and often the expertise) to develop appropriate offers. The networking and valorisation of museum offers and the use of the cultural and linguistic potential in Lusatia for economic purposes on the one hand, but also to strengthen ties to the region on the other, are only rudimentarily developed. This is the starting point for the structural change project ‘Valorization of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in the German-Slavic Context’, which will advance the valorization through various projects in cooperation with the cultural and creative industries.”<sup>31</sup> The sub-projects of the bundle of measures, which will be funded on

27 SORABICON 2023: “Bräuche und Feste der Sorben/Wenden in Spree-Neiße”, [www2.sorabicon.de/de/braeuche-spre-neisse/](http://www2.sorabicon.de/de/braeuche-spre-neisse/), 13. 3. 2024.

28 Hagemann, Jenny; Hanusch, Stefan; Jacobs, Theresa; Keller, Ines: Was ist sorbisches/wendisches Kulturerbe?/Co jo serbske kulturne derbstwo? Explanatory video 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DO-CkKMjj\\_Q&t=468s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DO-CkKMjj_Q&t=468s), 13. 3. 2024.

29 Laschewski, Lutz; Schneider, Gregor; Häfner, Daniel; Jacobs, Fabian: Inwertsetzung des immateriellen Kulturerbes im deutsch-slawischen Kontext. Subproject “Entwicklung von Inwertsetzungsstrategien”. Aktionsplan 2021. Cottbus 2021, [www.serbski-institut.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Aktionsplan\\_Anlage-zur-Einladung\\_20210422.4754.pdf](http://www.serbski-institut.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Aktionsplan_Anlage-zur-Einladung_20210422.4754.pdf), 13. 3. 2024.

30 [www.inwertsetzung-lausitz.de](http://www.inwertsetzung-lausitz.de), 13. 3. 2024.

31 Ibid. Translated from German by the authors.

a long-term basis, include the scientific monitoring of valorisation processes by a newly established department for regional development and minority protection at the Sorbian Institute,<sup>32</sup> e.g. through the organisation of a steering committee and participation processes or through the provision of analyses and studies. This also includes the further documentation of tangible cultural heritage and written testimonies, with exception of the sub-project “Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Lower Lusatia”. Here, in addition to an inventory and step-by-step documentation covering the whole of Lower Lusatia, not only the listed customs and festivals of the Sorbs are to be presented digitally. Practices from other ICH regions will also be documented and visualised in cooperation with cultural activists. In addition, preliminary work is planned to set up a research and advice centre for ICH among the Sorbs.<sup>33</sup>

Another project worth mentioning, which grew out of an initiative several years ago and has now been given the necessary resources for development and institutionalisation with funds from the structural change programme, concerns the transnational networking of four Lusatian UNESCO sites, with the awarded ICH of the Sorbs as the fifth element linking the sites. The project is therefore called “UNESCO 5” and involves the UNESCO Spreewald Biosphere Reserve, the UNESCO Global Geopark Muskauer Faltenbogen/Łuk Mużakowa, the UNESCO Upper Lusatian Heath and Pond Landscape Biosphere Reserve, the UNESCO World Heritage Site Pückler Park Muskau and the Domowina as the group responsible for the Sorbian ICH listing.<sup>34</sup> From 2023 to 2026, the joint project aims to contribute to tourism value creation and design multilingual educational programmes for sustainable development in eight sub-projects.<sup>35</sup> At the project kick-off on March 3rd 2023 in Klein Kötzsch, the President of the German UNESCO commission, Maria Böhmer, referred in her speech to the pilot function of the project in terms of cooperation between stakeholders working within the framework of different UNESCO conventions.

While the first example shows how the financial resources allocated were largely channelled into projects with no direct connection to the awarded ICH and the local actors, but instead focused on strengthening institutional structures and economisation, both cases illustrate how new alliances have emerged on a new level both within the community – especially between science and ethno-politics – and beyond in the region in the areas of cultural tourism, cultural and creative industries and with the Lusatian UNESCO sites.

32 [www.serbski-institut.de/forschung/regionalentwicklung-und-minderheitenschutz](http://www.serbski-institut.de/forschung/regionalentwicklung-und-minderheitenschutz), 13. 3. 2024.

33 [www.serbski-institut.de/projekte-kulturwissenschaften/praktiken-immateriellen-kulturerbes-in-der-niederlausitz](http://www.serbski-institut.de/projekte-kulturwissenschaften/praktiken-immateriellen-kulturerbes-in-der-niederlausitz), 13. 3. 2024. Translated from German by the authors.

34 [www.spreewald-biosphaerenreservat.de/unesco5](http://www.spreewald-biosphaerenreservat.de/unesco5), 13. 3. 2024.

35 Schmidtchen, Jost in an interview with Susann Troppa and Ellen Beuster: Ein UNESCO 5 – Rückblick und Ausblick auf die Zukunft. In: Nowy Casnik, 14. 3. 2024, p. 3; id. (ed.): Serbsku memory-hru zapřijeli. Džěto na projekće UNECSO 5 je w kraju a mjezynarodnje kežbność zbudžiło. In: Serbske Nowiny, 13. 3. 2024, p. 3.

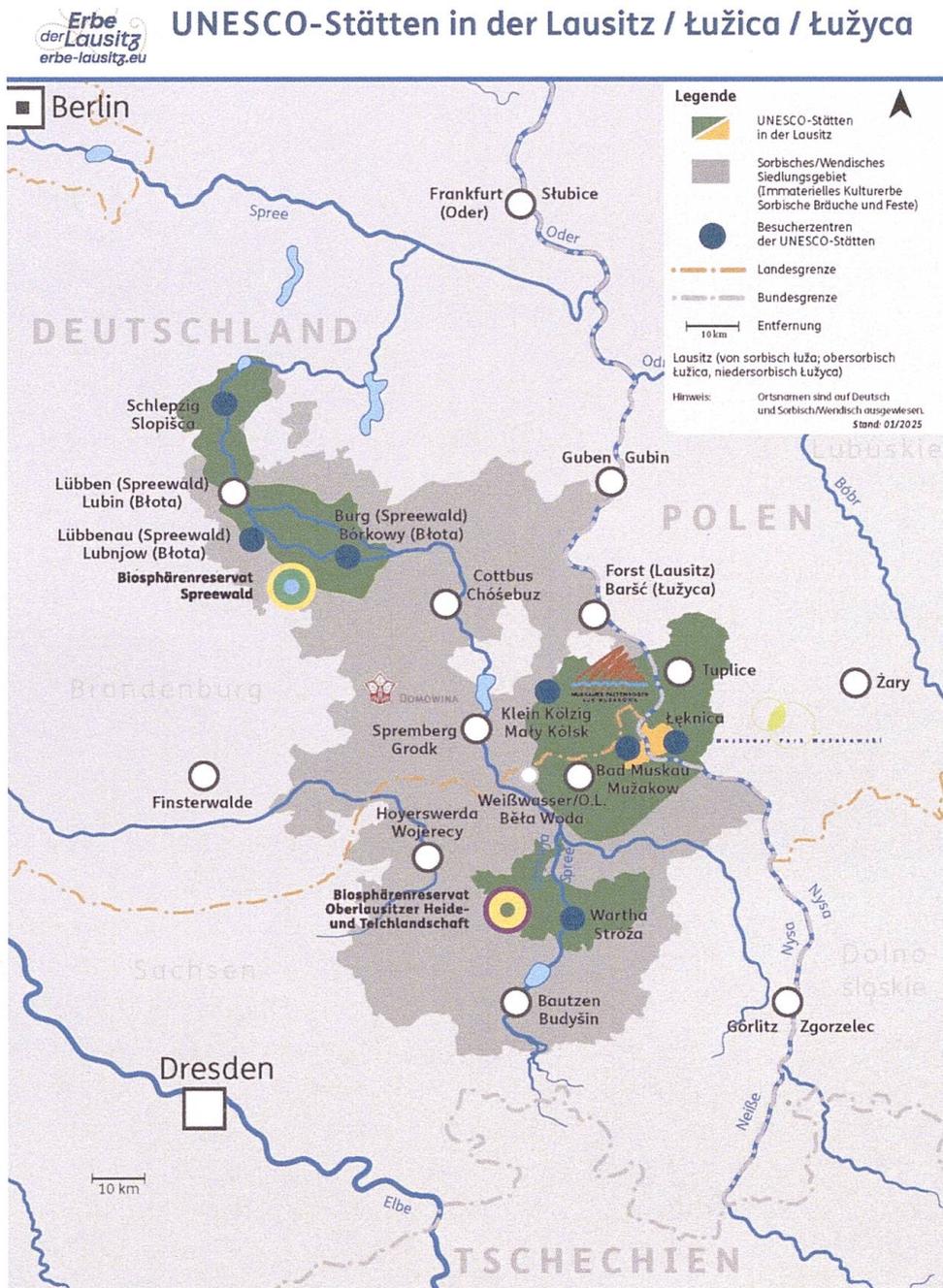


Fig. 1: Mapping of UNESCO sites in Lusatia and the Sorbian settlement area. Copyright: EVTZ/EGTC on behalf of Erbe der Lausitz, 2025.

## ICH as a Pawn in Settlement Area Issues

The listing has also had an unforeseen negative impact on the legal proceedings before the Cottbus/Chóšebuz Administrative Court since summer 2023. These proceedings concern the affiliation of (parts of) municipalities in Lower Lusatia to the Sorbian settlement area. A total of ten municipalities have taken legal action

against a decision by the Ministry of Science, Research and Culture, which, as part of an amendment to the Sorbian law in Brandenburg, declared the municipalities to be part of the ancestral settlement area of the Sorbs. According to the “Ordinance on the procedure for determining changes to the Ancestral settlement area of the Sorbs” of September 8, 2014, applications for determination of affiliation could be submitted by the Council for Sorbian Affairs to the state parliament and by the municipalities themselves until the end of May 2016. A continuous linguistic or cultural tradition up to the present day had to be proven. In ten applications submitted by the Council and approved by the Ministry, the communities questioned this continuity. In the legal proceedings, evidence of linguistic and cultural continuity was then gathered and re-examined for each individual part of the municipality. Evidence relating to customs played a central role.

The initial assessment of the Alt-Zauche/Wußwerk municipality constituted a pivotal moment in the proceedings.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the requirement of continuity was only recognised for the village of Alt-Zauche, but not for the village of Wußwerk. In their interpretation of the Sorbian ICH listing, the judges exhibited a fundamental misunderstanding of the cultural nuances embodied in the ICH Convention by reading the listing in an essentialist way. They scrutinised each individual custom to ascertain its suitability in the inventory, with the judges seeking to identify the “clearest possible reference to Sorbian origins”. In the case of certified “integrated regional practice”, that is, practices involving people from different cultural backgrounds, the “compelling reference” to the Sorbian “cultural heritage” or Sorbian “origin” was denied. According to this, customs in Wußwerk such as the Shrovetide custom Fastnacht, the Easter bonfire and the Fun fair Kirmes, which are also widespread in regions outside Lusatia and “(also) represent traditional customs of Christianity”, could support the Sorbian character of the village, but not prove it.<sup>37</sup> The same applies to the Shrovetide parade Zampern, to which the judges attributed a “clear Sorbian origin” but did not accept it as evidence because it is widespread beyond the historical settlement area in Lower Lusatia. In addition, the practice in Wußwerk differed from the general description of the custom in the application documents for the Sorbian entry. This led the judges to conclude that it was now more of a “regionally specific type of carnival”.<sup>38</sup> The judges’ lack of understanding of living culture in the sense of the ICH Convention not only led to a devaluation and degradation of the attested ethnically mixed participation and the diversity and further development of cultural practices. For the inhabitants of Wußwerk, who feel themselves to be a part of the Sorbian minority, it has also resulted in the loss of the minority rights protection framework for the exercise of their cultural practices, which is associated with belonging to the legally recognised settlement area. This also applies to groups in other localities who profess

36 Administrative Court Cottbus/Chóšebuz, 8th Chamber 2023, Decision 8 K 242/17, <https://gerichtsentscheidungen.brandenburg.de/gerichtsentcheidung/22236>, 13. 3. 2024. Translated from German by the authors.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

to belong to the Sorbian people, but whose membership of the settlement area was revoked by the court judgement on similar grounds.

The example illustrates the vulnerability of the minority-majority-relationship and represents a major intervention on cultural security, because essentialist interpretations of the Sorbian entry in the dispute over the affiliation of localities to the Sorbian settlement area denied individual groups of ICH a framework of protection under minority law in the exercise of their cultural practices.

## Impacts at the Level of Cultural Practice

The Sorbian listing in the ICH's Nationwide Inventory also had a practical cultural impact at the level of the actors' groups and individual actors. Since 2015, for example, the Domowina has organised an international colloquium on the subject of ICH as part of the biennial International Folklore Festival. The main purpose of this colloquium is to facilitate networking and the exchange of ideas among the invited and performing folklore groups. All groups are given the opportunity to introduce and present their own groups as well as their activities in the field of ICH. For Domowina, as the supporting organisation, this is a chance to network with international, minority sensitive actor groups of ICH.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the international network expansion, there is a growing emphasis on establishing a regional network with the practitioners of ICH. As part of the research project at the Sorbian Institute entitled "Practices of ICH in Lower Lusatia", an overview of living heritage practices is being developed together with local stakeholders. The inaugural workshop, held in March 2024 and organised together with the Domowina regional association of Lower Lusatia, created a forum for cross-local exchange between the stakeholders and identified the need for enhanced collaboration in strengthening awareness and appreciation of ICH.<sup>40</sup>

In November 2021, the Spreewald Association submitted the application about the Spreewald barge application for inclusion in the Nationwide Inventory of ICH. Although it was not declared as a Sorbian application, it was accompanied by Sorbian support and participation from both the stakeholders and the scientific side. In one of the two accompanying letters of support, the Sorbian aspect and the references to the existing Sorbian entry were explicitly addressed: "Sorbian was spoken throughout the region until well into the 19th century. Much of this is reflected in the way of life and culture as well as in the customs and festivals. The social customs and festivals of the Sorbs throughout the year, which were included in the Nationwide Inventory of the ICH in 2014, also bear witness to this. The Spreewald barge was closely linked to cultural practices throughout the year and throughout

39 Domowina: International Folklore Festival Łužica – Łužyca – Lusatia. 6.–9. 7. 2023. Programme at [www.domowina.de/mitgliedschaft/mitgliedsvereine/festival/programm](http://www.domowina.de/mitgliedschaft/mitgliedsvereine/festival/programm), 13. 3. 2024.

40 Porackojc, Katalin: Co su praktiki imaterielnego kulturnego derbstwa? Serbski institut jo k tomu na workshop pšosył. In: Nowy Casnik, 14. 3. 2024, p. 2.



Fig. 2: Bilingual information board in the municipality of Briesen/Brjazyna. Copyright: S. Bierholdt/Sorbian Institute, 2021.

life and thus also acquired symbolic significance.”<sup>41</sup> On March 15, 2023, the “construction and use of the Spreewald barge” was included in the inventory.<sup>42</sup>

Making Sorbian ICH visible, e.g. through an increased presence in social media, also means that customs can be better examined for possible legal conflicts, for example with environmental protection, animal welfare or human rights. This is also a recurring issue and area of debate in the international context, particularly in relation to customary practices involving animals. According to the UNESCO Convention on the Conservation of ICH, compliance with applicable rights and the protection of animals are important criteria.<sup>43</sup> In the Sorbian context, practices in connection with harvest customs repeatedly come to the attention of animal welfare organisations, most recently in autumn 2023.<sup>44</sup>

So far, we can only make vague statements about the effects of the entry on concrete cultural practices. In December 2017, in an evaluation of the application process by the ICH office of the German UNESCO Commission, Clemens Škoda from the Domowina did not identify any significant influences about the positive and critical effects of the award. Rather, in his response, he referred to a general

41 Keller, Ines: Der Spreewaldkahn – Lebensweise und Handwerk. Unpublished cover letter for application of the Spreewaldverein e. V. Bautzen 15. 11. 2021. Translated from German by the authors.

42 Deutsche UNESCO-Kommission: Bundesweites Verzeichnis des Immateriellen Kulturerbes. Bau und Nutzung des Spreewaldkahns, [www.unesco.de/kultur-und-natur/immaterielles-kulturerbe/immaterielles-kulturerbe-deutschland/spreewaldkahn](http://www.unesco.de/kultur-und-natur/immaterielles-kulturerbe/immaterielles-kulturerbe-deutschland/spreewaldkahn), 13. 3. 2024.

43 See also conference “Tiere als Kulturelles Erbe”, Landesheimatbund Sachsen-Anhalt, 28.–29. 9. 2023.

44 Pollmer, Cornelius: Hahnrupfen, [www.politische-bildung-brandenburg.de/themen/hahnrupfen](http://www.politische-bildung-brandenburg.de/themen/hahnrupfen), 13. 3. 2024.



Fig. 3: Bilingual promotional flyer with ICH logo. Copyright: Domowina, 2025.

sensitisation, visibility and “raising awareness of ICH”.<sup>45</sup> “The entry has not had any significant effects on the practice of Sorbian customs in detail so far, but this does not have to be the case. Rather, the topic serves as a point of orientation in the conception [...] and as ‘wings’ for future action plans. The conscious handling, sensitivity in the implementation, documentation and general engagement with our cultural heritage is, in my opinion, the greatest gain. Therefore, it is also necessary to keep exactly that ‘going’ and to educate people about the invisible (intangible) touch of a wealth in cultural care. This is also the greatest challenge: Cultivating awareness for ICH.”<sup>46</sup>

Looking back in January 2019, Clemens Škoda confirmed his assessment. The ICH logo of the German UNESCO Commission (DUK) and the reference to the “Nationwide Inventory” are used more openly in Lower Lusatia in particular, as many events there are organised directly by the Domowina regional association. In Upper Lusatia, the logo is used much less frequently, as the customs are not usually advertised using posters and flyers. Exceptions to this are international events or conferences. On the Domowina website, there is also no mention of the “Nationwide Inventory” at first glance. Only in the “media centre” is the logo of the German UNESCO Commission adapted for the Sorbian entry. Although there have been no effects that have had a concrete impact on the preservation of customs,

45 Škoda, Clemens: Email to Benjamin Hanke (German UNESCO Commission) dated 5. 1. 2018.

46 Škoda, Interview (note 15).

there is generally a greater awareness of the cultural heritage on the Sorbian side: “For me, the customs throughout the year are living Sorbian culture and important anchors of identification. Why shouldn’t our ICH fulfil this important function? We Sorbs have this rich set of traditions and customs, like a nervous system – or even better – like a kind of dark matter that gives the Sorbian people an invisible gravity.”<sup>47</sup>

Certain developments since the successful application at the level of local cultural practice and the perception of uncertainties there can be traced from the evaluation of the approximately 500 questionnaires collected in 2020/21 within the above-mentioned research project.<sup>48</sup> The survey on customs and festivals in a sub-region of Lusatia included questions on regional characteristics as well as identified risks and prospects. For example, changes in customs and procedures were reported, one custom was revitalised after 2014, another custom had seen an increase in the wearing of traditional costumes. Among the very few responses to identified risks were bans and restrictions, a lack of financial resources, problems in recruiting young people, a lack of premises for practising the custom, the risk of losing knowledge about the custom and a decline in Sorbian language skills. It is not yet possible to determine the extent to which these changes are related to the entry, and more in-depth research is required. At first glance, the risks mentioned do not seem to be directly related to the award, but rather to typical challenges of preserving customs in rural areas. However, from the perspective of cultural resilience and the ability of the Sorbian minority culture to survive, the threat of losing knowledge of customs and a lack of language skills are of existential relevance. And given the scarcity of financial resources in the post-mining area of Lower Lusatia, it is certainly worth asking whether new funding opportunities should not be invested so heavily in institutional structures and economic valorisation bypassing the cultural practitioners, but whether small project funding structures might be a starting point that could be considered from a cultural policy perspective.

## Reflecting New (In)securities – Conclusion

In September 2023 the Domowina Federal Executive Board decided to submit a preliminary announcement to the German UNESCO Commission, with the objective of exploring the possibilities of applying for the World List of ICH.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the application for the German list, where the initiative came from the top, from

47 Ibid.

48 [www2.sorabicon.de/de/braeuche-spre-neisse](http://www2.sorabicon.de/de/braeuche-spre-neisse), 13. 3. 2024.

49 Domowina press release from 22. 9. 2023, [www.domowina.de/pressebereich/blog/direktor-zelenu-swecu-dostal-zwjazkowe-predsydstwo-domowiny-je-4-serbskeho-namestnika-ze-sakskeje-dozalozboweje-rady-wolilo-1-2256](http://www.domowina.de/pressebereich/blog/direktor-zelenu-swecu-dostal-zwjazkowe-predsydstwo-domowiny-je-4-serbskeho-namestnika-ze-sakskeje-dozalozboweje-rady-wolilo-1-2256), 13. 3. 2024. See also Domowina (ed.): *Arbeitsrichtlinien des Bundesvorstandes der Domowina – Bund Lausitzer Sorben e. V. für den Zeitraum 2023–2025*. Cottbus/Chóšebuz 2023, [www.domowina.de/fileadmin/Assets/Domowina/Mediathek/Dokumente/de-dzelowe\\_smernicy\\_Domowiny\\_2023-2025\\_schwalene.pdf](http://www.domowina.de/fileadmin/Assets/Domowina/Mediathek/Dokumente/de-dzelowe_smernicy_Domowiny_2023-2025_schwalene.pdf), 13. 3. 2024.

the ministries, this time it seems to have started bottom up, as recommended in the ICH Convention. It also sounds like a success story, with the cultural policy representatives of Domowina acting as an interface between cultural practitioners at grassroots level and supra-regional cultural policy structures. They seem to take a positive view of the development and now want to take the next step. However, as this article has tried to show, the path taken after the inscription has not been so straightforward and there is a constant need to critically reflect on the milestones.

The question of whether the award has led to greater cultural security can only be answered in a nuanced way. In the application process, organised civil society in the form of the Domowina, with its established structures of representation and participation as well as the scientific support, was able to prevent some potential uncertainties, e.g. by deciding to apply for the whole of Lusatia and its diversity of customs. As a result, there were no major internal debates about envy, no highlighting and special development of individual customs, but probably also no intensified local use of the ICH award. Regarding the (hoped for) benefit of the ICH award from the Domowina perspective, its use as a cultural policy instrument for more recognition and (financial) support for the promotion of Sorbian culture has worked out and has triggered an enormous dynamic, even though it coincided with the window of opportunity for structural change and when institutions beyond the Domowina also participated. In this respect, a strengthening of cultural security in the dimension of the minority-cultural institutional structure can be recognised and the developments have confirmed political participation while at the same time promoting the acceptance and appreciation of cultural otherness.

An unexpected loss of cultural security with regard to the free exercise and further development of cultural practices as a means of self-assurance and collective identity construction resulted from the essentialist judicial interpretation of the entry in the dispute over the affiliation of parts of the municipality to the Sorbian settlement area. A lack of understanding of the broad concept of culture and the living culture understanding of the ICH Convention on the part of the decision-makers can be observed here. Whether and if so, what economic effects the developments initiated under the label of “valorisation” will have on the Sorbian community and on the concrete practice of the customs can hardly be reflected on so far, as none are yet discernible. However, the projects financed from structural change funds are still in progress, networks in the post-mining region are only growing slowly, the implementation of tourism measures such as a Sorbian-themed cycle route will take time, which is why the effects of valorisation on the practice of the awarded Sorbian customs can only be expected later, if at all. But, as already suspected, it is not to be expected in such a condensed and exponential form due to the diversity and large scale of the customs. Finally, it should be noted that there is still a general lack of basic understanding of the ICH label and its specifics, and that it will probably take some time, not only in Lusatia, to convey an appropriate understanding of the label and the associated opportunities and risks, and to put it into practice.

**Zusammenfassung:**

Gleich in die erste Liste des *Bundesweiten Verzeichnisses des Immateriellen Kulturerbes* der Deutschen UNESCO-Kommission im Jahr 2014 wurde die nationale Minderheit der Lausitzer Sorben mit ihren «Gesellschaftlichen Bräuchen und Festen im Jahresverlauf» aufgenommen. Seitens der Trägergruppe verband sich mit der Aufnahme die Hoffnung auf eine Stärkung minderheitenpolitischer Rechte sowie eine höhere öffentliche Sichtbarkeit. Ausgehend von diesen Erwartungen von sorbischer Seite beschäftigt sich der Beitrag einerseits mit den Reaktionen auf die Bewerbung und den Eintrag sowie mit dem weiteren Umgang der Sorben damit. Es wird beleuchtet, welche Möglichkeiten sich durch die Listung für kulturpolitische VertreterInnen der Minderheit eröffneten und welchen Einfluss das auf die TrägerInnen der kulturellen Praktiken hatte. Andererseits erfolgt eine wissenschaftlich-kritische Reflexion anhand der Nachwirkungen des Eintrags auf Zusammenhänge mit einer Generierung «kultureller Sicherheit». Damit soll auf die bedeutende Rolle verwiesen werden, die minderheitenrelevante Forschungsperspektiven in der Beschäftigung mit der Forderung nach einem Wissenstransfer in die Praxis spielen.

*Keywords: Sorben, Minderheit, kulturelle Sicherheit, Lausitz, immaterielles Kulturerbe, UNESCO, Kulturpolitik, kulturelle Praxis*