
PRESERVATION OF POLISH IDENTITY IN SERBIA: LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND TRADITIONS AS FOUNDATIONS OF ETHNIC HERITAGE

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to highlight the importance of identifying and promoting the Polish language, culture, and customs in the Republic of Serbia by emphasizing the unique tangible and intangible cultural heritage and identifying strategic activities that could contribute to the long-term vitality of the language and culture. The study is based on secondary data that address numerous and diverse cultural determinants correlated with the sustainable process of preserving and enhancing vital elements that ensure an adequate interpretation and affirmation of Polish cultural heritage. The Polish diaspora in the Republic of Serbia plays an important role in nurturing and maintaining connections with Polish heritage, primarily through the preservation and promotion of the Polish language, culture, and traditions outside the homeland. The cultural heritage potential of the Polish national community in the Republic of Serbia provides a stable platform for building sustainable socioeconomic and cultural development based on tangible and intangible resources. The research findings and conclusions offer an opportunity to apply and implement innovative and creative solutions in preserving cultural heritage and building a positive image and reputation.

Keywords: Polish identity, language, culture, tradition, ethnic heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

The globalization process undeniably tends toward developing a monolithic cultural model in place of a diverse cultural landscape. However, individuals and various social groups express a natural aspiration for self-identification. It is both natural and expected that, within the broader sociological and cultural dynamics and constant transformations, social groups construct their collective identity through interaction (Mitrović, 2005). Sančanin (2019) points out that the integration of cultural and historical heritage with quality interpretation provides a given location with a comparative advantage through recognizability and authenticity. Today, heritage is viewed as an important driver of economic development, creating conditions for fulfilling visitors' demands for meaningful leisure experiences, generating employment opportunities, and serving as a foundation for shaping and maintaining a desired identity.

The relevance of this topic is also reflected in the recognition of the real dangers posed by the homogenizing effects of globalization, which may suppress the distinctive features of traditional and local cultures and lead to cultural appropriation, borrowing or imitating aspects of one culture by another, thereby diminishing the uniqueness of the original culture (Mazurkevych, 2024).

Due to the historical upheavals experienced by the Polish nation, identity and its protection have always played a crucial role in both the public and private life of its citizens. In the past, Poland served as a refuge and home to many religious and ethnic minorities while simultaneously fighting for its independence and national identity. Throughout history, the country disappeared from the map of Europe for approximately 123 years as a result of the partition of its territory among Prussia, Austria, and Russia, which was accompanied by the prohibition of the Polish language in many regions (Matulewska & Mikołajczyk, 2021).

Over the past centuries of Polish history, generations of Poles have preserved and nurtured the cultural tradition upon which a uniquely shaped and diverse national identity has been built. The Roman Catholic Church has played a significant role in Polish cultural tradition since the very beginnings of the Polish state, that is, since the Christianization of Poland in 966. Thanks to Nobel Prize-winning authors, including Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz, and Olga Tokarczuk, Poland has earned a reputation as a “land of poets and writers.” (Polish Institute - Cultural Service of the Polish Embassy in Beijing, n.d.)

One of the key aspects in understanding the maintenance and transmission of language within the diverse and dynamic cultural contexts of the Polish diaspora ecosystem is the role of the family and the pressure of surrounding policies, which are reflected in everyday interactions, communication patterns, and linguistic choices within family life (Jakubek-Głąb, 2024).

Emphasizing the economic benefits of cultural heritage can be decisive for its acceptance. Król (2021) argues that the potential of cultural heritage should be viewed through the lens of a balanced combination of cultural (social) potential, cultural components (resources, potential for building and strengthening social ties, regional integration,

and shaping regional identity), and economic potential associated with economic benefits (including promotion), job creation, tourism, image, and regional branding. The realistic potential of cultural heritage should acknowledge the necessity of sustainable overall development that respects the natural environment and the rich diversity of the cultural landscape.

The expansion of cultural and scientific cooperation between Poland and the Western Balkans has become increasingly evident in the 21st century. Works by Balkan authors are frequently published in Poland, often exceeding the number of translations from other European languages, and the trend is similar in the opposite direction. Performances by Goran Bregović as a solo artist, as well as his successful collaborations with Polish artists Kayah and Krzysztof Krawczyk, have sparked an interest in Balkan music in Poland. The level of scientific cooperation is equally remarkable: in the border region of Montenegro and Albania, archaeological studies have been established by the University of Warsaw, while the Polish linguist Zuzanna Topolińska has made a significant contribution to the development of modern Macedonian linguistics. Professor Topolińska is a full member of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts and a foreign member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Balcer & Halili, 2020).

2. A STRONG DIASPORA – A GUARDIAN OF IDENTITY

Estimates of the Polish diaspora vary due to differing criteria applied by individual countries, but the overall number ranges from 18 to 20 million, placing Poland among the nations with the largest diaspora populations in proportion to their homeland. The largest number of Poles living outside Poland resides in the United States, approximately 9.6 million, while about 4.2 million Poles live in EU member states. The most significant concentrations are found in Germany (1.5 million), France (800,000), the Netherlands (200,000), and Italy (150,000). Around one million people of Polish origin live in the territories of the former Soviet republics: Belarus (295,000), Lithuania (200,000), Ukraine (144,000), Russia (47,000), and Kazakhstan (34,000) (Polonia Historia, 2024).

According to the 2021 census published by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, there are 657 members of the Polish national minority living in the Republic of Croatia, most of whom reside in the City of Zagreb, the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, and the Split-Dalmatia County. They receive state budget support for activities in the fields of information, publishing, and cultural amateurism (Government of the Republic of Croatia, n.d.). The highest recorded number of Poles in the Republic of Croatia was in 1931, 4,103 individuals, while thirty years later, that number had declined to 1,151. The continuous decrease in the number of persons belonging to the Polish national minority was interrupted only once, between the 2001 (567) and 2011 (672) censuses (Vojska.net, n.d.).

According to the 2022 population census, there are 615 members of the Polish national community living in the Republic of Serbia. The National Council of the Polish National Minority, headquartered in Ostojićevo, consists of 15 members elected for a four-year term. The Council has the authority to establish institutions, associations, foundations, and enterprises in the fields of culture, education, information, and official use of language and script, as well as to initiate and monitor the adoption and implementation of laws and other regulations in these areas, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Statute of the National Council of the Polish National Minority, 2018). The Government of the Republic of Serbia has committed to continuously implementing concrete measures aimed at protecting and promoting national minorities, particularly in the fields of culture, education, and the use of language and script.

Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Poland and Serbia, then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, were established in 1919. However, significant progress in bilateral relations was not recorded until the 1950s, while the conflicts in the territory of the former Yugoslavia later led to their weakening. In the field of culture, an important milestone was the Agreement between the Governments of Poland and Serbia, which entered into force in 2014. Among other provisions, it expanded the scope and forms of cooperation in the protection of cultural heritage and monuments, as well as in safeguarding copyright. The Agreement provides substantial opportunities for cooperation in film co-production, collaboration within international organizations, exchanges between local and regional youth communities, support in the field of education—including the teaching of each other's languages and literatures—and cooperation within the academic community (Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Belgrade, n.d.). To enhance the educational process of the Polish community in the diaspora, Poland established the Institute for the Development of the Polish Language in 2022, with the aim of providing concrete support for Polish education abroad and promoting the Polish language as a mother tongue among the Polish diaspora. By mid-2023, the Institute had organized the First World Congress of Polish Education and Science Abroad, focusing on educational and cultural-educational activities aimed at advancing Polish science and promoting education among the Polish diaspora worldwide (Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2023).

Under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Polish Institute was opened in Belgrade in 2023 as the 26th institution of its kind worldwide. Its mission is to promote Polish heritage, culture, history, science, and

language. In addition, the Institute is responsible for implementing international obligations, monitoring the results of agreements and cultural programs, and establishing permanent contacts with foreign partners active in the field of international cultural exchange (Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Belgrade, 2023).

3. TANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND ON THE UNESCO LIST

Cultural heritage represents an authentic and unique resource, while cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors determine its qualitative and quantitative value. In this sense, it can be argued that cultural heritage holds the status of a strategic resource upon which cultural revitalization and overall development are founded (Sančanin et al., 2019). Tangible and intangible heritage are directly correlated with the physical space in which they exist, as well as with the community that preserves, protects, and transmits this heritage to future generations. In a historical context, the turbulent political and social dynamics caused by wars, destruction, displacement, and extermination of populations have resulted in significant difficulties in redefining and accepting heritage (Żmudzińska-Nowak, 2021). It should be noted that since the adoption of the Venice Charter, over the past six decades, the concept of heritage has neither been clearly defined nor standardized among countries, each of which has developed and adopted its own guidelines and terminology (Yahaya, 2006).

Poland has 17 sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, including 15 cultural and two natural properties: Krzemionki Prehistoric Striped Flint Mining Region (2019), Tarnowskie Góry Lead-Silver-Zinc Mine and its Underground Water Management System (2017), Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe (2007), Wooden Tserkvas of the Carpathian Region in Poland and Ukraine (2013), Centennial Hall in Wrocław (2006), Muskauer Park / Park Mużakowski (2004), Wooden Churches of Southern Małopolska (2003), Churches of Peace in Jawor and Świdnica (2001), Kalwaria Zebrzydowska: the Mannerist Architectural and Park Landscape Complex and Pilgrimage Park (1999), Castle of the Teutonic Order in Malbork (1997), Medieval Town of Toruń (1997), Old City of Zamość (1992), Historic Centre of Warsaw (1980), Auschwitz Birkenau - German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp, 1940-1945 (1979), Białowieża Forest (1979), Historic Centre of Kraków (1978) and Wieliczka and Bochnia Royal Salt Mines (1978). (UNESCO, 2019)

Cultural heritage represents an important factor supporting tourism development in destinations, and one of the key determinants of a successful destination is its positive image, which enables it to effectively attract visitors. In practice, it has been shown that cultural and historical heritage plays a more significant role in creating an attractive image of a city than modern or post-industrial structures. Cities perceived as historical are generally considered far more appealing for leisure activities than those primarily associated with industrial functions (Szubert et al., 2021).

One of the common motives for visiting a particular destination is its cultural heritage, which, according to San Martin and Del Bosque (2008), shapes the cognitive architecture of the destination's image through its natural environment, tourism infrastructure, and overall atmosphere.

4. INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF POLAND ON THE UNESCO LIST

Intangible cultural heritage represents an essential segment of culture that is nurtured and transmitted from generation to generation. Due to the rapid pace of civilization development and increasingly intense migratory movements, this form of culture is insufficiently promoted, although under the strong influence of globalization it has become even more important for preserving the identity of nations and individuals alike. With the rapid processes of economic globalization and modernization, traditional beliefs, values, and ways of life seem to be growing ever more distant. Hu et al. (2019) and Skublewska-Paszkowska et al. (2022) emphasize the relevance of cultural heritage, noting that it is precisely thanks to such a legacy that we possess knowledge about our ancestors, their ways of living and working. In this context, the authors highlight the importance of developing 3D technology, which enables increasingly accurate representations of this domain, offering opportunities for recording, preserving, and presenting heritage for future generations.

In order to adequately protect, promote, and manage intangible cultural heritage, the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies in Warsaw established, on March 14, 2024, a Department dedicated to living heritage, with particular focus on intangible cultural heritage. The task of the interdisciplinary expert team is to provide answers regarding when such resources should be regarded as public goods and to identify the most appropriate tools and methodologies for addressing current challenges, including the application of artificial intelligence (UNESCO, 2024).

The influence of religion on various traditions and customs is evident: deeply rooted in Catholicism, many Polish cultural manifestations are closely linked to religious events. In Poland, religion is not merely a matter of belief, it is interwoven into the very fabric of society, connecting people and fostering a sense of belonging (QLT Travel Club, n.d.).

Hu et al. (2019) point out the strong cultural and tourism potential inherent in intangible heritage resources, which are, however, often undiscovered, inadequately interpreted, and lacking the expected level of commodification. This is one of the key reasons why there is an increasing emphasis on the need for academic engagement in defining the place and role of intangible cultural heritage from the perspective of tourists. Such an approach would contribute to the more effective promotion of heritage while simultaneously providing additional and necessary resources for its protection and preservation (Kotus, 2025).

The policy of intangible cultural heritage encompasses its conceptualization within the framework of national cultural policy. In this regard, Konach (2023) notes that strategies and administrations often face challenges related to the scientific contextualization and diverse politics of representation and identification. The author specifies that, while articulating the growing importance of intangible cultural heritage, national decision-makers are in fact constructing national inventories through a process of global networking and positioning shaped by symbolic determinants.

Poland ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011, and six elements are currently inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. On the initiative of Poland and an interregional coalition composed of Botswana, Bangladesh, Morocco, South Korea, Panama, Rwanda, and Slovakia, the UNESCO Executive Board established the International Day of Intangible Cultural Heritage, celebrated annually on October 17 (Portal Polskiego Radia SA, 2023).

Polonaise, traditional Polish dance (2023)

The traditional Polish dance, the Polonaise, is performed in a ceremonial procession that can include anywhere from a few pairs to several hundred. The leading pair determines the path of movement, while the others follow in a rhythmic step that involves bending one leg and stepping forward with the other. During the performance, the pairs create various figures, for instance, raising joined hands to form a “living bridge” through which the other participants pass. Due to its moderate tempo and simplicity of movement, the Polonaise can easily be learned even by those without prior dance experience, making it an inclusive form of social expression. In contemporary practice, it is an essential part of high school graduation celebrations and symbolizes unity and the marking of important life milestones. As a cultural phenomenon, the Polonaise carries deep social and symbolic significance, it embodies cooperation, harmony, and equality, while promoting the values of solidarity, dialogue, and community cohesion. (UNESCO, 2023)

Timber rafting (2022)

Timber rafting in Poland, as well as in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia, and Spain, originated in the Middle Ages as a means of transporting people and goods. The knowledge and skills required for constructing and navigating wooden rafts were shared and transmitted among communities. This valuable tradition has been preserved and maintained through oral transmission to younger generations, most commonly by organizing festivals, workshops, and youth camps. (UNESCO, 2022)

Falconry, a living human heritage (2021)

The Republic of Poland is among the countries where falconry is practiced as a living human heritage and, as such, is part of the multinational nomination of this element of intangible cultural heritage. In addition to the communities engaged in falconry — ranging from individual families to entire villages, specialized institutions have also been established to support practitioners. These include falconry centers and hospitals, as well as organizations that assist in the production of traditional falconry equipment. (UNESCO, 2021a)

Flower carpets tradition for Christi processions (2021)

The arrangement of floral carpets for the Corpus Christi procession represents a distinctive feature of this intangible heritage, which has been preserved and nurtured for more than two centuries. The village of Spycimierz, along with several locations in the southwestern part of the Opole region, is particularly renowned for its authentic floral compositions. Families from multiple villages jointly create colorful floral carpets along the route of the solemn procession following the Mass, bringing the entire community together and strengthening the local cultural identity. (UNESCO, 2021b)

Tree beekeeping culture (2020)

The uniqueness of the intangible heritage of tree beekeeping does not lie in the pursuit of increased honey production, which marks a fundamental difference from conventional apiculture, but in the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge, rituals, and beliefs associated with the cultivation of wild bees in hives placed on trees or in log structures within forest environments. This practice represents a distinctive synthesis of human care for nature, cultural heritage, and a sustainable relationship with the natural environment. (UNESCO, 2020)

Nativity scene (szopka) tradition in Krakow (2018)

This tradition is deeply rooted in the Polish city of Kraków and is based on skills and knowledge passed down through generations. It represents a social practice originating from Christmas customs: every first Thursday in

December, artisans and craftsmen gather in Kraków's main square to present their creations, thereby preserving and revitalizing a centuries-old tradition of community and creativity. (UNESCO, 2018)

5. CONCLUSION

The issue of affirming Polish identity through a holistic approach to preserving and nurturing the language, culture, and traditions represents an important and challenging topic for researchers examining the territorial and chronological continuity of the Polish presence in the Republic of Serbia. It has been shown that each new study on this subject significantly enriches the field of science, with its contribution valued through a multidisciplinary perspective. In the context of globalization, the preservation of Polish cultural identity is a complex task that should be consciously and purposefully implemented, primarily through activities aimed at affirming and promoting cultural identity by continuously safeguarding tangible and intangible cultural assets preserved by previous generations. A particular challenge in this regard lies in the planned administrative and legal measures concerning the numerous diaspora, taking into account the existing cultural, legal, and institutional practices implemented in other countries. The process of preserving and promoting the intangible cultural heritage of the Polish national minority in the Republic of Serbia, viewed through the prism of its complexity and phenomenological multilayeredness, provides an opportunity for a more comprehensive understanding of the intangible heritage of this relatively small yet significant national minority, as well as for the appreciation of its authenticity, uniqueness, and potential for creating new cultural and tourism products that could attract visitors from the Republic of Poland. Through the rich tapestry of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, this could establish a stable platform for fostering and preserving the national identity of the Polish national minority.

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