

Challenges in the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Lithuania

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Abstract: This research analyses the challenges of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Lithuania, with a particular focus on the role of heritage communities in cooperation with the state, considering the role of volunteer enthusiasts, as well as economic and socio-cultural policy. The case study is based on statistical data analysis, participation and observation, and a survey of the leaders of ICH safeguarding. The study reveals that constructive interaction between heritage communities and authorities represents the optimal strategy for success. Questionable funding models that prioritise innovation should be revised to align with the needs of local traditions in order to ensure even regional distribution and diversity of cultural expression. Enthusiasts seek to increase ICH awareness within society and to strengthen collaboration with the state in order to reinforce the cooperation and dialogue network that promotes experience exchange, research, and education.

Keywords: ICH safeguarding and promotion, cultural policy and economics, critical heritage studies, Lithuanian intangible heritage

Introduction

The situation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in contemporary Baltic Europe can be described as a constant challenge provoked by dynamic changes in the economic and socio-cultural life of society caused by technological and economic progress and changing cultural policies. The surprising contradiction between ideal concepts and expectations in the safeguarding of ICH and the reality of their implementation is the main issue addressed in this paper.

With the entry into force of the 2003 *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2006, research on ICH has increasingly adopted a critical ethnographic perspective. Empirical studies now focus on local discourses, examining both the instrumentalisation of heritage as cultural property and the involvement of a range of actors including individuals, communities, private and state institutions (Lähdesmäki et al. 2020: 120).

David Lowenthal, providing the theoretical basis for critical heritage studies, challenged essentialist or objectivist notions of heritage and aligned with the constructivist stance that sees heritage as a contemporary social practice. Lowenthal treated authenticity as a negotiated rather than intrinsic concept. Heritage studies, in his view, explores how the past is marketed, packaged, and consumed (for example, in media, museums, tourism). According to his view, we don't retrieve the past as it was, but rather construct it based on present needs, values, and ideologies. Heritage is an emotional, selective, and identity-driven subject. Heritage is not a neutral transmission of the past, it is often instrumentalised. He discussed the revival of the past through outdated practices, and "presentism", where contemporary concerns distort perceptions of the past. He also analysed the exclusion of certain groups from heritage narratives (Lowenthal 2015).

ICH can become a form of embedded cultural capital from which self-determination can emerge amidst the multiple crises of the rural world. Even identifying a common task and forming a task force can be enough to trigger reassessment and a change in social consciousness (Meissner 2024: 437–449). Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital helps us understand how individuals or groups gain social and economic advantages through culture. He distinguished three forms of cultural capital: a) embodied cultural capital (the knowledge, skills and competences that an individual acquires); b) objecti-

fied cultural capital (material objects – for example books, artworks, instruments – that convey cultural value; c) institutionalised cultural capital (the recognition or validation of cultural knowledge or achievement, often through formal education or qualifications such as degrees or awards). Embodied cultural capital refers to knowledge and experiences which are made by people in contact with their social and natural surroundings. This type of implicit and explicit knowledge determines our lifestyles. In turn, objectified cultural capital describes a material state of cultural capital, namely cultural goods or objects. The application of cultural objects, their understanding and appreciation, depends on embodied cultural capital. Institutionalised cultural capital can be regarded as a further form of objectification of incorporated cultural capital (Bourdieu 2007: 46–58). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital explains how ICH is transmitted, preserved, and valued, linking cultural practices to social, political, and economic power. ICH, as embodied cultural capital, shapes societal identity and prestige, while sometimes reinforcing social stratification; its preservation often depends on resources and networks, with some traditions restricted to specific groups.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention promotes cultural participation as essential for socially sustainable development and underscores the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration between cultural organisations, fostering relationships between diverse communities, groups, individuals, and other stakeholders. It advises against top-down, expert-driven approaches, urging active participation from all directly involved. ICH safeguarding should ensure the widest possible participation of the communities, groups, and individuals who create, maintain, and transmit it, actively involving them in its management. The Convention draws attention to indigenous communities, groups and individuals in their production, safeguarding, maintenance and recreation of ICH, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity. Critical heritage studies have moved beyond the traditional focus on technical management issues to view cultural heritage as a political, cultural, and social phenomenon, with increasing attention paid to the economic and social dimensions of ICH and its role in sustainable development (Bortolotto & Skounti 2024).

The concept of ICH can generate new cultural management policies that drive social and cultural change through interaction, knowledge transfer, and shifts in agency (Kuutma 2024: 73–89). Laurajane Smith has raised issues related to the implementation of the Convention on ICH that are still relevant today,

for example popularisation, involvement of heritage communities, economic value, education, dissemination (especially through the internet), recognition and diversity in cultural policies, and the fusion of material and intangible heritage in the latest concepts (Smith 2014: 12–22).

According to Kynan Gentry and Smith, the discourses that frame our understanding of heritage are a performance in which the meaning of the past is continuously negotiated in the context of the needs of the present (Gentry & Smith 2019: 1148–1168). Heritage is a ‘discursive construction’ with material consequences (Smith 2006: 11–13).

Research has critically pointed out many cases where public involvement in heritage processes is shaped by power imbalances and hierarchies, which go against UNESCO’s ideal of a community-driven, bottom-up approach. Heritage revitalisation is often controlled by experts, political interest groups, and professional elites from various institutions, while broader local society remains uninvolved (Tauschek 2010; Bendix 2013; Schneider & Uhlig 2023).

Cultural heritage safeguarding ‘from below’ can reveal the value of previously overlooked local capacities and resources (Robertson 2012). Broad community involvement can become a significant endogenous development factor, especially in shrinking peripheral rural areas. This can be achieved through identification and valorisation of one’s own heritage, based on local bottom-up structures such as voluntary work or private initiatives. Networking through joint projects fosters a renewed understanding of shared heritage and strengthens the recognition of common roots and regional identity (Trummer & Uhlig 2025: 542).

Case studies examine how the 2003 UNESCO Convention has shifted heritage governance from top-down regulation to approaches that enhance local actors’ autonomy and foster horizontal, multi-level, cross-sectoral networks involving civil society and the private sector in rural heritage policy-making. In such an approach, communities articulate their needs, influence development processes, and collectively assume responsibility for the safeguarding of ICH. Incorporating local stakeholders’ knowledge and capacities enhances the mobilisation of community potential, while coordinated cooperation across governance levels ensures integration of local, regional, and national structures. In rural areas with limited development capacity and policy expertise, these collaborative approaches can yield substantial benefits and serve as models for

other regions (Swyngedouw 2005; Böcher 2008; Horlings & Marsden 2014; Akagawa & Smith 2019; Trummer & Uhlig 2025: 556–557).

The economic development of peripheral regions through UNESCO cultural heritage – particularly ICH – has become a key focus in cultural policy and management, playing a strategic role in valorisation processes that support both cultural and economic development. Studies show that locally embedded heritage, such as ICH awards, can catalyse cross-sectoral, endogenous networking and stimulate collaboration across culture, business, and politics, transforming cultural capital into social and economic capital. Such revitalisation can benefit supportive networks while also serving hidden commercial or political interests. Examining the actors, networks and discourses of participation in ICH safeguarding reveals underlying cultural values and local powers, highlighting the social and developmental significance of ICH for communities and regions (Tauschek 2010, 2013; Meissner 2021: 163–171; Cerquetti & Ferrara et al. 202; Trummer 2023).

In Lithuania, critical heritage studies are relatively scarce, with Audronė Pociūtė's research offering valuable insights into the relationship between cultural heritage, regional development, and heritage safeguarding policies. She criticises the situation at the time when EU funds remained difficult to allocate for regional heritage protection and promotion projects. She emphasised that decentralising the management and administration of these processes fosters a better understanding and preservation of heritage, while strengthening cultural, economic, and social ties within communities and supporting regional development. Her study highlights how, in France, local communities play a significant role in shaping cultural heritage policy because heritage is understood as a foundation for community identity. Pociūtė predicts that the future of cultural heritage protection will largely depend on residents' awareness, values, and commitment to maintaining their heritage, with priority given to grassroots initiatives. Moreover, she argues that bringing society and heritage closer together, enhancing interregional and interinstitutional cooperation between heritage and art sectors, and developing reliable systems for disseminating information about cultural heritage should be central objectives of heritage safeguarding (Pociūtė 2005).

Heritage researcher Rasa Čepaitienė has examined from an ideological perspective the instrumentalised attitude toward Lithuanian cultural heritage in the construction of national identity. She theoretically analysed the perspec-

tives of nationalist and multicultural (multiethnic and European) interpretations of heritage, along with the related challenges and the opportunities they offer. The current context of today's Lithuanian heritage protection is also touched upon, i.e. the strengthening local and regional self-understanding and ambiguously assessed manifestations of heritage commercialisation (Čepaitienė 2006: 47–54).

Vitalija Rudzkienė and Reda Skrodenytė identify Lithuanian artistic folk crafts, certified by the National Heritage agency, as key economic, social, and cultural assets that can drive prosperity while safeguarding identity in a globalised world. The authors attributed low domestic demand for this production to weak information dissemination and propose complementary marketing with targeted strategies such as ethnological research, digital promotion, and strategic positioning in order to strengthen authenticity recognition and stimulate consumption (Rudzkienė & Skrodenytė 2012: 68–79).

Martynas Purvinas highlights how Western scholarship extensively studies traditional rural culture and heritage using vast historical archive sources covering economic, technological, social, folk-cultural, and settlement development aspects, as well as narratives of peasants' lives. In contrast, Lithuania lacks a holistic analysis of traditional rural culture as an integrated complex. Since the loss of its leading researchers, studies remain narrowly focused on isolated phenomena, leaving fundamental questions and the broader scope of rural heritage insufficiently explored compared with international research (Purvinas 2020: 3–14).

The connections between economic aspects of rural culture and ICH transmission are currently being studied intensely by Lithuanian and international ethnochoreologists (Wharton & Urbanavičienė 2022).

According to Khun Engh Kuah and Zhaohui Liu, academics have an obligation to bring attention to disappearing culture and to help raise the visibility of local voices to protect the diversity of ICH (Kuah & Liu 2017).

Based on critical heritage discourse and the search for hidden local and state power relations, as well as the various networks and governances arising from local negotiations of ICH, in this paper I explore the 'anthropology of success' (Trummer & Uhlig 2025), examining the ways in which the implementation of the status of ICH in real cultural life can transform communities and revitalise heritage traditions.

At the same time the main aim of this study is to identify the challenges arising in the promotion, actualisation, and safeguarding of ICH in Lithuania and to provide recommendations for addressing them. The phenomenon of ICH is analysed and classified through economic-financial, art studies, folkloristic, and cultural management perspectives.

The research is based on my experience as an expert in the Lithuanian ICH Inventory Commission, as well as on a survey of respondents collected by means of a questionnaire developed in the course of the study commissioned and sponsored by the Lithuanian Council for Culture (LCC). The study was carried out within a 2022 project organised by the non-profit NGO Kultūr that aimed to determine the state of preservation and actualisation of ICH and the possibilities of its improvement.

For this research statistical data on the interaction between ICH communities and state support is used. Apart from statistical analysis, several other methods will be used: a) participant observation and direct participation in several events and processes (2014–2023), especially as an expert for the applications submitted to the Lithuanian UNESCO National Heritage List Commission; b) case studies based on structured interviews (2021) with five ICH community leaders (of the different branches of folk culture: visual folk art, economic folk art, customary folk art, ethnochoreography, folklore) or their natural or revived tradition promoters in different types of location (national park, regional park, resorts, the capital, villages, and the countryside).

A synthesis of *emic* and *etic* perspectives is applied. The more and less successful practices of interaction between the leaders, managers, ethnologists and municipal and state institutions involved in safeguarding ICH traditions are discussed. Analysing the situation in this way helps to define more objectively the challenges in this field of culture.

The inclusion of folk cultural phenomena in the UNESCO ICH National Inventory (Savadas.lnkc.lt 2019) means that they are considered an important element of cultural policy. However, in the second half of the 20th century folklore in Lithuania often served as a form of opposition to official culture, as a means of national and cultural resistance to the official political and cultural soviet ideology and aesthetics.

Consequently, this leads to logical questions: What are the benefits of the National ICH Inventory for the communities involved in practicing their herit-

age, and for society today? What system of safeguarding should be developed, and how?

ICH's relationship with cultural policy

Analysis of the phenomenon of ICH, which is spread nationwide or localised in protected natural areas and resorts, or in the provinces and cities of Lithuania, shows that there are a few important external factors influencing the vitality, transmission, and promotion of tradition of intangible heritage and folk culture in Lithuania: a) the economic-financial factor, b) the socio-cultural factor, c) the context of the cultural climate in the state and the main trends and values implemented and promoted by the state's cultural, scientific, and education policies (government, parliament, municipalities).

The ratio of activities in the field of ICH safeguarding carried out by the various state-level, municipal non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and heritage communities becomes clear when comparing the numbers of successful applications submitted by four different types of institution (including joint interinstitutional bodies) that led to the inscription of 48 elements into the Lithuanian ICH Inventory (according to the situation as of 2023): 1) municipalities provided 44.444% of the inscribed elements, 2) state authorities provided 28.572%, 3) local communities provided 17.46%, 4) social organisations provided 9.524% of all inscribed elements. It is evident, that municipalities and state institutions are the most active when it comes to the submission of heritage elements for inscription in the national ICH Inventory.

A total of 48 elements in the Lithuanian inventory have planned methods for their preservation and safeguarding. The principal forms are propagation and dissemination (at events and in the media), which are prescribed for all 48 elements. The documentation, accumulation and management of data pertaining to processes, activities, individuals, groups and communities are prescribed for 38 elements. A total of 37 elements are linked to workshops, while 35 elements are associated with other specific measures such as education programmes (formal and informal).

However, this assessment does not take into account the calculation or planning of the numbers of newcomers and their limits on a particular tradition,

nor are there any measures for planning and calculating the effectiveness and intensity of the transmission and popularisation of tradition.

The economic and commercial factors that shape the viability of crafts and visual folk arts are of paramount importance. It is imperative that the Lithuanian Council for Culture (LCC), a state cultural foundation, provides support for educational, performing and exhibition activities, as the alternatives from private foundations are underdeveloped in Lithuania.

The principal source of financial support for the promotion of intangible heritage is the state, particularly in the form of programmes and projects organised by the Ministries of Culture, Agriculture, and Education, Science and Sport (in collaboration with UNESCO). The Parliament of the Republic is responsible for the declaration of special plans for activities dedicated to anniversary dates or other notable events that occur on an annual basis. Furthermore, municipalities implement specific financial programmes designed to bolster local cultural initiatives. In addition, at their fairs municipalities apply certain specific tax discounts to traditional craft products certified by the National Heritage Agency under the Ministry of Agriculture. But when it comes to ICH as a whole, the cultural and scientific research projects partly supported by the LCC is of the utmost importance for the safeguarding of ICH. However, it must be noted that the Year of Folk Art (2020), declared by the Lithuanian Parliament, was one of the most challenging for the Lithuanian Folk Art Association from a financial perspective, as the lowest number of projects were supported by the LCC that year. This indicates a lack of coordination between the primary state institutions in the field of intangible heritage safeguarding policy.

The main Lithuanian folk traditions can be divided into several branches: 1) folklore and customs, 2) handicrafts and enterprises, 3) fine crafts and visual folk art, 4) other cultural practices. The monitoring and analysis of ICH safeguarding processes shows that folklore and customs can survive better than the other branches, independently of economic benefits or state support because they are based on community values, socio-cultural interaction and communication, as well as on local social community creativity and family traditions based on sharing and participation.

According to the geographic specificity of practices associated with values already included in the national ICH list, these practices can be divided into: a) traditions practiced in national or regional parks, resorts or other areas heavily visited by tourists, b) local but prominent traditions in other areas of

the province, c) traditions practised in both regions and centres, d) national, geographically broad traditions (for example, Lithuanian Christmas Eve *Kūčios*) that suffer from poor support from the state, municipalities, and even local communities due to problematic coordination, as it is unclear who should take the lead and how. It is obvious that these activities require different human and financial resources in centres and at the periphery. However, criteria for evaluating the funding of such different areas have not yet been developed.

In contrast to the governance of material cultural heritage, Lithuania lacks a clear concept and qualification for ICH professionals and experts. However, this role is partly addressed by the qualification process for folklore specialists organised by the Lithuanian National Culture Centre (LNCC) which runs seminars for specialists who are evaluated in competitions and are involved in projects activities.

The LCC funding scheme gives priority to the ideology of innovation in its support for projects. However, this cannot be an important criterion for the safeguarding of authentic traditions and can be treated as manifestation of 'presentism'. The Folk Culture Safeguarding Council, expressing the consolidated opinion of ICH specialists, has repeatedly appealed to the LCC, criticising this provision and inviting discussion¹, but has received no response. The lack of dialogue is one of the most sensitive challenges of ICH safeguarding in Lithuania. Therefore, the role of the leader of the ICH or folk-cultural tradition and its community, his initiative and professionalism, scientific and methodical competence and ability to manage relations with local and state institutions and society at large effectively are crucial. In some cases, the dilemma of a rational division of responsibilities between ICH carriers, their communities and their leaders, municipalities and the state arise.

For example, traditions such as Christmas Eve *Kūčios* or the tradition of place names in the countryside require a specific community to take responsibility. However, organising such a community for Christmas Eve is a challenge because it is a private, family-based celebration. And the preservation of the country's traditional place names is directly dependent on government policy on real estate registers. The best environment for ICH vitality, development and economic benefit is where local managers, scholars, folk culture specialists, the state and community institutions work actively and positively with the bearers of local heritage. The data collected from heritage practitioners and promoters highlight these challenges of safeguarding ICH.

ICH Safeguarding Challenges and Strengths from Leaders' Perspectives

1) The straw gardens tradition

Soviet ideology was indifferent or hostile towards customary, ritual folk art. Straw gardens – handcrafted hanging octahedral straw ornaments made from grain stalks, used in traditional weddings and at Christmas and Easter as interior decorations (Fig. 1) – was therefore a tradition in decline. However, towards the end of the Soviet era, attention was drawn to straw gardens at exhibitions organised by the Lithuanian Folk Artists' Union, and young people became interested in them. In recent decades the leader of the straw gardeners craftsmen's association *Dangaus sodai* (Heaven Gardens), Marija Liugienė, prominent creator, handicraft educator and exhibition organiser, has played a key role in their promotion. While working as a manager at the municipal Vilnius Ethnic Culture Centre (VECC), she developed skills in writing project proposals for submission to the LCC and has shown a strong commitment to promoting straw gardens. She has received funding for international seminars, conferences and exhibition projects, and gathered a community of straw garden makers. Following the successful submission of her application, the straw gardens tradition was included in the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Lithuania. Subsequently, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture and the LNCC, this community actively prepared the documentation for the nomination of the straw gardens tradition to the UNESCO World Heritage List, which was successfully accomplished, securing its inclusion. An inaugural standalone exhibition of straw gardens was held in 2013; the tradition was included in the UNESCO National Inventory in 2017, and on World Heritage List in 2023.



Figure 1. Lithuanian straw gardens made by Danutė Palaimienė. Photo by Vytautas Tumėnas, 2025.

Convinced that straw gardens deserve more attention, renowned Lithuanian designer Saulius Valius used blue-painted aluminum tubes to create a modern interpretation of their octahedral form for the EU Council's interior in Brussels, serving as a symbol of Lithuania's Presidency in 2013. In the same year, he was also the architect of the first-ever exhibition dedicated exclusively to straw gardens, curated by Liugienė at the Lithuanian National Museum. Over the next two years, she held eight additional exhibitions in various locations. In 2020, she also established an association of handicraftsmen, called *Dangaus sodai*, to promote the crafting of straw gardens and to foster the advancement of this cultural practice.

Liugienė, identified the following problems concerning the safeguarding of this tradition:

1. There are no firms in Lithuania that engage in the cleaning, cutting and sale of straw. Consequently, there is a lack of competition in this field and the majority of the raw material purchased by craftsmen is sourced from online suppliers in Germany and Estonia.
2. The absence of inter-institutional collaboration. There is a notable deficiency in communication between the various state institutions, coupled with a discernible lack of robust collaboration with the local community.

The Dotnuva Institute of Agriculture could assist us in procuring the requisite raw materials. However, it is imperative that the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Culture reach a consensus regarding the provision of support. The association is insufficiently resourced to exert influence. Despite the signing of cooperation documents that stipulate the provision of consultation by the aforementioned ministries, the responsibility for the success of the venture ultimately rests with the leader of *Dangaus sodai* only, due to the lack of a formalised support structure. Upon submission of the application to UNESCO, this association was assured that assistance would be forthcoming. But despite their efforts and contributions, the government's support remains inadequate.

3. To date, no museum in Lithuania has a permanent folk-art exhibition of straw gardens. The primary source of funding for this initiative is the LCC, which has provided funding for over ten projects. During the course of the song festivals, the LNCC provided partial funding for straw garden exhibitions. Vilnius City Municipality provided financial support for the production of a film. Following an exhibition in Croatia, the straw gardens were sold at auction. A further auction is planned, with the proceeds to be sent to Ukraine. The activities are designed to highlight the significance, relevance and accessibility of the subject matter. These include exhibitions in Lithuania and abroad, as well as educational workshops, seminars and video lessons accessible online. In addition, the VECC publishes books and organises conferences, while also selling educational practical sets for this handicraft which become popular before Christmas.

The following activities are intended to incorporate the straw gardens tradition into daily cultural, social and economic life:

- The craft was demonstrated and products sold at heritage markets and fairs (producing an income);
- This handicraft session, which had social and therapeutic aims, was organised in prisons and for the disabled. The craft was studied in relation to teaching spatial thinking and geometry at a seminar entitled Teaching Spatial Thinking by Making Straw Gardens, held at the Lithuanian Centre of Informal Youth Education.

- Making straw gardens is incorporated into informal education through the state-funded Culture Pass.

The following channels of communication have been identified as means of communication between society and community: Exhibitions and training sessions, word-of-mouth, websites, Facebook, national and particularly regional media, documentary film, books, conferences.

Dissemination results. As a consequence of the exhibitions, a number of individuals have initiated the construction of their own straw gardens. Approximately 1,000 people have received instruction in workshops, with ten percent of them expressing interest in this fine craft. Following the tradition's inclusion in the National ICH Inventory, there has been a notable increase in public interest in both the craft and its practitioners, leading to an increase in self-respect for those who create straw gardens. Furthermore, there is a community-boosting effect as a community has been born; it is encouraging to be part of this, with the knowledge that support and extra help are available.

The implementation of exemplary aspects of safeguarding management is contingent upon the collaboration of community leaders and other individuals who are invested in the perpetuation of a specific tradition. A model of dissemination is achieved through the implementation of various measures, including the organisation of exhibitions, symposiums and teaching sessions.

An analysis of the straw gardens tradition revealed that the exceptionally robust cooperation between ICH tradition leaders, NGOs, local authorities, and state institutions – originating primarily from the private initiative of folk artists – produced impressive and exemplary results, demonstrating how an active and influential community of fine craft practitioners can be nurtured, one that has achieved global recognition for this tradition. In this way, through cross-sector networking and bottom-up activity, the country's cultural capital was mobilised to cultivate abundant social capital, the activities of which have revived this tradition. However, it is believed that the future successful development of the tradition will depend precisely on the improvement of state policy in this field.

2) The Old method of winter fishing for smelt and vendace by rotating a bobbins in Balteji Lakajai lake in Mindūnai village

Some local fishing traditions in Lithuania survived Soviet modernisation only thanks to their flexible adaptation to the economy of state socialism, i.e. by being incorporated into fishing enterprises and persisting as modest amateur fishing, or by poaching, which also had motives of economic resistance to the Soviet regime. Today the old method of fishing for smelt and vendace in winter by pulling a net into the lake through a hole in the ice and using a rotating wooden bobbin pole called a *boba* (comprising a horizontal seine and a vertical pole used to winch up a fish net from beneath the ice) is little known in Lithuania. However, it has been applied uninterruptedly since the end of the 19th century in the area of Baltieji Lakajai lake in Mindūnai village in the Labanoras Regional Park, Molėtai District. The fishing traditions that survived in one way or another now face new challenges. On the one hand, sustainable development and environmental protection have been restricted with the aim of preserving natural resources, and on the other hand the workforce has moved away from rural areas in search of more attractive opportunities in other activities. Therefore, the promotion of local fishing aligns with the community's interest in strengthening its cultural, economic, and social identity, increasing its visibility, and enhancing the attractiveness of life in the area.

The Winter Ice Fishing Festival in Mindūnai, managed by Aldona Petrauskienė and held annually since 1995, is a relatively successful example of the aforementioned ancient practice. This led to the documentation of this fishing tradition in the National UNESCO Inventory in 2017. The fishing heritage is integrated into the famous village Festival, which includes a culinary heritage fair, sports activities, fishing demonstrations, and folklore performances. The event attracts a considerable number of tourists and visitors on an annual basis, and provides an appropriate platform for anglers to sell their catch. In this instance, the authentic tradition has become an integral component of contemporary festival management, which has a beneficial effect on the advancement of the regional museum, as well as on the cultural and economic life of local communities.



Figure 2. Winter fishing with *bobas* in Mindūnai. Photo by Juozas Petrauskas, 2014 (Savadas. lnkc.lt 2019).

The initiators of the Festival are the local museum (the Lake Fishing Museum in the village of Mindūnai, a branch of the Molėtai Regional Museum) and specifically staff member Alfreda Petrauskienė while the main organisers are the museum collective and active members of the village community. The Festival's partners are commercial fishermen, amateur fishermen, certified craftspeople, folklore ensembles from Molėtai and neighbouring regions, the administration of Molėtai Region Municipality and the Directorate of the Labanoras Regional Park. The circle of festival participants and partners grew along with the festival's popularity. At present, participants enquire of the festival's initiators whether the festival will go ahead. There has been a symbiosis of sustainable cooperation between museum staff belonging to the local community, and the heritage community and its value leaders.

The sources of funding can be classified into the following categories: museum funds (ensembles are remunerated for their appearances); project funding from the Ministry of Culture, the LCC, and municipal and (NGO) support programmes (a local club called KOPS (Travel, Explore, Discover, and Enjoy Sport) was established to administer the project's funding for this Festival); and private sponsors. Other sources of funding include the establishment

and awarding of prizes by private individuals and organisations, such as the municipality, which provides financial support for the Festival, which is one of the four most significant festivals in the region. Nemunas, the Lithuanian Rural Sports and Culture Association, (of which KOPS is a member) also offers assistance in the form of prizes, medals, and championship cups. Some supporters organise activities and establish prizes independently. The majority of expenditure is allocated to the rental of stages, mobile toilets and rubbish containers, and the utilisation of waste.

The Festival originated as a modest winter ice fishing competition. Subsequently, commercial fishermen, who employed traditional techniques such as the use of the *boba*, became involved. As the event expanded, particularly from 2012 onwards, certified craftspeople (predominantly those specialising in wood, pottery and knitted goods) and folklore ensembles from Molėtai and neighbouring regions also became involved. The festival has expanded to encompass a variety of activities, including sporting events, musical performances, a craft market, commercial activities, and a fish soup-making competition. From its inception, the overarching objective has been the provision of entertainment. The format of the festival enables the presentation of indigenous cultural values in the context of alternative fishing techniques and related phenomena. The commercial aspect, with fish and other craft goods available for purchase, and the ecological aspect, with a quiz organised by the Directorate of the Labanoras Regional Park on the subject of the park, fishing and birdlife, are also of significance.

The following channels are utilised for the dissemination of information regarding activities: the Molėtai Regional Museum website; the Lake Fishing Museum Facebook page; announcements made at education institutions and tourism agencies; word-of-mouth, which is considered the most effective method of communication; and media outlets.

The results of this dissemination revealed that up to 100 amateur fishermen participated in the competition, with approximately 1,500 spectators in attendance. The objectives of the Festival are to provide an opportunity for people to learn how to relax in a natural setting, to fish, to exercise patience, and to interact with one another, with the *raison d'être* being to foster a sense of community cohesion. This is accomplished through the Festival's collective organisation, active participation in the event itself, and subsequent relaxation and enjoyment.

The transmission of this ICH value is not the sole objective of the Festival, as it is too narrow a concept to be commercially viable and certain restrictions apply. The objective is to familiarise the general public with this ICH. To this end, filmed material illustrating ethnographic fishing practices is exhibited at the museum, while the fishing process is demonstrated on the lakeshore via a large screen. The public was impressed and began to contribute new exhibits to the museum, including archaeological fishing equipment that they had discovered.

As the festival expanded, the municipality became increasingly invested in its preservation and popularisation while the general public's awareness of the museum's existence rose, as did the number of visitors (outside of the Festival). This combined effect ensures the continued popularity and survival of the value. Eventually the inclusion of this item in the National ICH Inventory prompted the municipality to accord greater attention to this value and the village itself.

The following aspects are worthy of particular commendation: 1) the rationale behind the combination of an element of ICH, mass event organisation and the aims and methods of museologists (it can be argued that without the museum exhibition, dissemination and knowledge of this value would not be as great), 2) the importance of goal-oriented local ethnographic research in the safeguarding of ICH.

This case analysis shows how attention to ICH can become a catalyst for creating new jobs, and how cross-sectoral cooperation (culture, business, politics, media, etc.) and grassroots mobilisation can foster the growth of the region's cultural industries and economy as a whole. In this case, the enthusiasm of local cultural managers and tradition leaders for nurturing and promoting tradition are far more effective than the external influence of ICH experts and the state.

However, despite excellent management, the consequences of climate change have threatened the Festival's survival, as insufficient ice during warmer winters has made it impossible to practice or demonstrate ice fishing for the past three years.

3) *Jurginės* Festival in Palanga

The *Jurginės* (St. George's Day) Festival in Palanga was a significant day in the traditional local calendar, although by the end of the 20th century its importance had greatly diminished. Therefore, a group of local enthusiasts decided to revive, reconstruct, and develop this tradition into a widely known festival.

The contemporary St. George's Day Festival in Palanga, initiated by ethnologist and folklorist Zita Baniulaitytė, has been held since 1990 as a springtime event featuring a folklore ensemble and their acquaintances. Since its inception, the festival has grown from a small gathering of enthusiasts on St. George's Day to a significant regional event. In 2021, the tradition was included in the National ICH Inventory.

Subsequently, the involvement of the municipality increased, along with that of other organisations, city and professional communities, and private sponsors (for example horse riders, the Botanical Garden, the Catholic Church). Ultimately, the project was successful in securing various tenders, thereby transforming the event from a local tradition into a regional folklore festival that enjoys nationwide support.



Figure 3. The *Jurginės*, or St. George's Day, Festival in Palanga. Photo by Eglė Mekuškienė, 2018.

What are the activity initiators, executors, partners and model of collaboration in the Festival? The activity is initiated and executed by the Mėguva Palanga resort city folklore ensemble, which is led by its founder Baniulaitytė. The tradition was revived on the basis of the calendrical importance of archaeological discoveries on Birutė Hill made by professor Vladas Žulkus, and the astronomical temple research and reconstructions of Saulius Manomatis and professor Libertas Klimka. The festival's principal regular partners are the Di-

rectorate of the Palanga City Botanical Gardens, which views the event as the 'season opening celebration' of the park, and other Lithuanian (and occasionally Latvian) folk ensembles.

The initiators collaborate with the Municipal Palanga Culture Centre, the Public Library, a regional history society, education institutions, equestrian clubs, mounted scout groups, sports enthusiasts, and the University of the Third Age. Over the past decade, the parish has also become involved, performing mass in the chapel on Birutė Hill.

At the outset, there were challenges in persuading stakeholders that this was not merely a narrow folklorists' festival, but rather had the potential to evolve into a city-wide celebration. Historians Žulkus and Mikelis Balčius played a pivotal role in facilitating communication with the municipality's Department of Culture and staff at the Culture Centre. At conferences, they consistently emphasised that St. George's Day had already been revived. The primary challenge lies in the reluctance of personnel from the education sector to engage in collaborative efforts, with a prevailing sentiment that the two domains are not aligned.

Financially the festival is dependent on the collaboration of various municipal institutions, including the Park Directorate and the Culture Centre. In addition, the involvement of volunteers, including folklore ensembles and other enthusiasts of the festival, is crucial to its success. In its inaugural years, the festival was entirely self-funded, relying on the dedication and enthusiasm of its organisers. As the festival gained greater publicity, the Palanga Cultural Centre became involved, and the municipality began to provide some funding. Despite the fact that folklore is not a particularly favoured genre in Palanga the municipality has demonstrated a growing interest in stylised dance forms. It has even been proposed that the St. George's Day Festival be held only every second year. Despite the inclusion of the project in the ICH Inventory, the initiators have not yet received any funding from the LCC. It is possible that the request was excessive, given the scale of the project. Should the current trajectory persist, it is likely that the festival will become entirely commercialised, with all participants required to pay for their own participation. However, this is not merely a festival, it is the city's celebration. Therefore, it would be wholly inappropriate to restrict access to the park and make it a paid event.

The activities that were undertaken with the intention of revealing the importance, relevance and accessibility of the value can be categorised as follows:

- Lectures and conferences, which were initially organised but later discontinued as they were not appropriate to the Festival's timing.
- A parade through the city, which included different social groups such as folklore ensembles, the city's residents and tourists, horse riders, sportspeople, school students, a religious contingent and families with children. This activity was considered to be crucial, the most important and enjoyable part of the Festival. Historical sources describe a procession that commenced at the church and concluded at Birutė Hill. Similarly, the contemporary iteration of this tradition involves dancing and singing along the route, fostering a sense of collective joy and attracting a considerable number of onlookers.
- In addition, non-stage concerts by folklore ensembles are held, wherein these collectives traverse the city, singing and dancing at various locations at any given moment. The absence of a dedicated concert stage underscores the festival's emphasis on collective participation and authenticity. The Park administration's assistance, particularly that of director Aušra Latonienė, was invaluable in explaining the importance of St. George's Day to the staff.
- National TV made a short film about the Festival in 1999.

In order to incorporate the values into daily cultural, social or economic life, a variety of activities have been implemented. These include various accompanying cultural and sports events, such as exhibitions, a mystical sound and light display, a show jumping event, an open day at the horse riding club, orienteering competitions and a gardening fair. This latter event was once held during the Festival as an experiment, but was later discontinued due to the abundance of other fairs. Furthermore, a connection with the environment and the spring awakening of nature is realised through land art and sustainable art (patchwork art exhibitions).

In terms of activity communication, the most effective channels were found to be personal interaction, local and regional press articles and announcements, national and regional news portals (for example www.alkas.lt), and specialised websites (for example ICH List, blogs, forums, Facebook (including the homepages of folklore ensembles, the horse sports community, the Folk Culture Association), the LNCC), YouTube (to a lesser extent), and Wikipedia. In addition, regional television and film were significant contributors to the

dissemination of information. Three videos about the festival were produced and uploaded to YouTube and Facebook.

Following its inclusion in the ICH Inventory, the festival has attracted greater interest from the municipality and its Culture Centre. Conversely, the residents of Palanga themselves do not always evince a great deal of interest. The Festival plays an instrumental role in prolonging the tourist season, establishing a strong association with its opening in mid-spring. The successful activity, as an organised initiative, is grounded in ethnologic and historic research conducted by local experts, which is essential for any city seeking to identify and develop its unique cultural assets. It comprises numerous inter-related components, requiring collaboration across various fields and social groups. The Festival integrates cultural, natural, and religious elements, aiming to foster harmonious coexistence.

4) The *Polka* dance in Lithuania

Traditional dances in Lithuania (alongside professionally stylised so-called 'national' stage dances performed by amateur artists), persisted within Lithuanian folklore communities and their events throughout the 20th century. They were documented by folklore scholars, members of ensembles and amateur enthusiasts of regional studies during ethnographic expeditions. However, more detailed publications on authentic traditional dances only appeared at the end of the 20th century. The practice of traditional dances continues today through folklore ensembles and clubs.

The Traditional Dance Club (TDC), which has been in existence for over 30 years, plays the most active role in popularising traditional Lithuanian dances, including the *Polka*. The folklorist Eugenija Venckauskaitė (a staff member at the LNCC and a member of the Vilnius University Regional History Club) initiated the promotion of the *Polka* prior to the restoration of Lithuanian independence. This initiative was subsequently disseminated within the Vilnius TDC (from 2002 onwards). Since 2004, traditional dance summer camps have been conducted annually. In 2017, the Lithuanian *Polka* was incorporated into the Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The *Polka* being danced at the Traditional Dance Club summer campus at Salos manor, Rokiškis reg. Photo by Vytautas Tumėnas, 2025.

The TDC was established by the Lithuanian Folk Culture Association, which is led by Dalia Urbanavičienė. Clubs were established in Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda. The primary activity partners are the VECC, LNCC and the Lithuanian Music and Theatre Academy. However, a significant challenge remains in accessing suitable venues for rehearsals and evening dances, particularly in capital city Vilnius. This is compounded by evidence suggesting that the Municipality of Vilnius does not sufficiently value the *Polka* and other traditional dance heritage.

The TDC organisation is primarily funded through participant fees, with the input of volunteer assistance also being significant. The availability of funding is a determining factor in the scope and scale of the activity. According to the leaders, in 2022, due to a lack of project funding, participant fees were increased and there was minimal advertising, resulting in the lowest ever turnout of 150 participants at the summer camp.

The dance club has not received any funding from the LCC for the past five years, and the camp has not received any funding for the past two years. The rationale behind the decisions made by the LCC is often unclear and lacks coherent argumentation. It is anticipated that the TDC will receive low scores in the areas of inclusion, continuity, skill improvement, and target group involvement. Furthermore, the LCC has thus far declined to provide funding for ancillary costs such as fuel, equipment, and technical rentals.

The most significant TDC events are traditional dance evenings held on a regular basis throughout the year in Vilnius and Klaipėda (once per week), and Kaunas (once per month). During the warmer months, these evenings are held in public spaces around Vilnius, thereby encouraging social dancing. During the colder months, dance evenings move indoors and are accompanied by traditional dance lessons. Only live traditional music is performed. In addition, TDC events include New Year's Eve night dances and traditional dance summer camps that are organised in different locations around the country each year.

In terms of activity communication, Facebook is of the utmost importance. The Vilnius TDC public group forum has 1,249 members, the Kaunas TDC forum has 821 members, and the Klaipėda TDC forum has 512 members. In order to facilitate broader communication, additional financial resources are required.

Dissemination of the results has led to an increase in the number of Facebook group members, demonstrating that the popularity of the initiative is growing and that the community is active, as evidenced by the number of comments and images and videos that are shared. The weekly event held by the Vilnius TDC has also gained popularity, attracting between 50 and 70 participants. Another improvement can be seen in the largest number of attendees for the summer dance camp, at 420. While the quantity of participants is significant, the quality of the lectures, lessons, and fiddlers is also of importance as it enhances the cultural, artistic, and social appeal of both the *Polka* and the dance events. The social function of these dance evenings in Vilnius is important, as they provide a space for people of all generations to meet and interact, facilitated by the implementation of a fee for local participants. The incorporation of the *Polka* into the inventory did not result in heightened interest or concern from the state, leading to a sense of ambivalence among our communities regarding this outcome. A substantial increase in support would be provided by the presentation of a more compelling rationale for why the LCC does not endorse our initiatives; we await the input of more qualified experts.

The following aspects are worthy of commendation: activity is predicated on the foundation of robust leadership, the fervour of cultural workers, the assistance of volunteers, and collaboration with scholars and practicing specialists in this field. The value is safeguarded and popularised through the implementation of inclusive social activities, such as dance evenings and summer camps.

Here we have a case in which intangible cultural heritage serves to unite a modern, specialised community of practitioners, forming a nationwide heritage community. A successful promotion strategy is employed, addressing the artistic, aesthetic, socialisation, and leisure needs of contemporary society.

5) The singing tradition of the southern (Šiliniai) Dzūkai in the village of Žiūrai

It is also important to highlight the contribution of other disciplines, such as ethnology, folkloristics, art studies, ethnomusicology, ethnochoreology, and so forth, to the popularisation of research, and to participation in management processes of ICH events and activities. It is of great importance that their work should be directed towards the discovery, cultivation and guidance of talent in the direction of authentic traditions, particularly in the case of leading folklore ensembles. Ethnologists and those who practice ICH work acting together brings great benefit to the field, as without such collaboration there is a risk of the work being of poor quality and lacking content.

A principal criterion for the continued viability of ICH is the transfer of tradition-specific knowledge through the involvement of specialists. This emphasises the significance of the policies of research and education institutions (the Ministries of Education, Culture; universities and high schools) in the training and education of these professionals.

Nevertheless, there are instances where ICH bearers, municipal and state institutions, and scientists are unable to reach consensus with the community's leading figures, resulting in less successful outcomes. The lack of constructive dialogue between communities and external specialists, as well as authorities, can result in the undermining of the quality and authenticity of tradition practices. This can lead to the transformation of a tradition from high-level artistic expression into a predominantly social phenomenon.

The 19th-century singing tradition in the Dzūkian spoken and musical dialects of Žiūrai village (Fig. 5) is one of the best-preserved in Lithuania and still unites the community today. The Žiūrai folk ensemble was formed in 1970 on the initiative of folklorist Jonas Trinkūnas, and even had the support of the Soviet authorities; its songs were released on a Melodiya record and broadcast on Lithuanian television. After the restoration of independence (in 1991), as the oldest singers aged and passed away, the ensemble's activity declined. In

recent decades, however, encouraged by folklore experts to collaborate and inspired by the ensemble's 50th anniversary, there has been a revitalisation of the group that unites several generations, including newcomers to the village.



Figure 5. The elder generation of the Žiūrai village folk ensemble at its 45th anniversary celebration, 2016 (Varėna Cultural Centre Archive and LNCC Archive).

In my research the southern Dzūkai singing tradition in Žiūrai village was observed in the context of collaboration with experts in folklore practice. As indicated by my informants, some younger members of the community displayed a lack of enthusiasm for acquiring a comprehensive understanding of tradition and properly inheriting the singing style from their elders. The prevailing opinion within the community was that rehearsals were merely for the purpose of socialisation and celebration. Ultimately, a dispute arose between the managers of the musical record project and community leaders. The production and publication of the ensemble's songs on record were only made possible through considerable effort on the part of the external organiser. In this context, it is pertinent to recall the observations of Smith, who emphasised the significance of dialogue and the capacity to negotiate as pivotal elements in any heritage consultation process (Smith 2014). However, such competencies are not yet included in the curriculum for heritage professionals.

Following the acquisition of funding from the LCC, the community organised a notable celebration to mark the 50th anniversary of the ensemble's

debut performance. A compelling documentary film was produced that offers an insight into their tradition. Nevertheless, while the future of this tradition remains uncertain among scholars of folklore, its problematic aspects are not publicly discussed so as to avoid any potential harm to the reputation of the ensemble and the tradition itself.

It is clear that subjective internal factors play a crucial role in ensuring the endurance of tradition, its creative adaptation to new circumstances, its transmission, education, explanation and promotion. These factors include the extraordinary artistic talents and specific aesthetic values of tradition bearers and their family members, as well as a strong communal support. This implies that individuals who embody tradition are indispensable in the preservation of ICH.

This case demonstrates that top-down approaches to reviving tradition can be difficult to implement and insufficiently effective, as ICH folklore heritage experts require not only knowledge of art management and heritage, but also specialised competencies in psychology (particularly of village communities) and mediation. Moreover, participants' narrow 'project-based' approach to cultural and rural economic development, coupled with insufficient attention to cross-sector collaboration and networking, and the necessity to engage deeply with heritage, may reinforce local tradition bearers' illusion that learning traditions is unnecessary, as they are supposedly innate. Consequently, there is a risk that artistic traditions could lose their aesthetic quality and becoming merely social phenomena.

Conclusions

The investigation critically examines the perspectives of selected practitioners representing diverse Lithuanian ICH elements as cultural capital, highlighting their power relations, achievements, and the societal, education, organisational, cultural-ideological, and economic challenges in maintaining traditional practices, as well as endogenous and exogenous factors limiting society's access to ICH knowledge transmission and acquisition. This regional experience also offers insights that are universally applicable to enhancing ICH safeguarding.

The key challenges identified in ICH safeguarding, whether in the continuation or revival of a tradition, are promoting public awareness and understand-

ing, enhancing societal prestige (which is further undermined by the absence of permanent exhibitions for living traditional crafts in national museums), limited consensus among communities and between local and central government institutions over the distribution of responsibilities and authority, weak cross-sectoral collaborative networks and insufficient inter-institutional communication, and the need to develop effective communication between heritage specialists and communities, some of which show fatigue when preserving the artistic quality of a tradition.

There is a dearth of broad-based long-term strategic training opportunities for tradition culture managers. The most successful cases of safeguarding ICH elements owe much to practitioners' enthusiasm and leaders' practical management skills, developed largely through life experience rather than formal training.

Existing economic incentives, such as tax relief, are suboptimal, particularly when the high cost or limited availability of materials diminishes the benefit for crafts people's compared to the greater financial and marketing capacities of large business. Representatives of the performing arts highlighted the considerable difficulties encountered in renting appropriate and affordable spaces for rehearsals and events, particularly in the capital city. Some respondents indicated that the economic support provided by the state is insufficient, despite the involvement of their tradition in the ICH Inventory. On the other hand, no measures exist to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change, which in recent years have brought the practice of under-ice net fishing to a halt.

The LCC's emphasis on progress and innovation in ICH projects reflects 'presentism', privileging contemporary relevance in ways that could inadvertently reshape traditions, creating significant challenges in balancing the preservation of traditional forms with the encouragement of novel approaches in ICH governance.

The LCC's funding principles are seen as insufficiently effective for the specifics of ICH. The neoliberal funding framework tends to eliminate weaker project initiators who are unable to compete effectively, a situation at odds with the objective of preserving the diversity of cultural expressions and ensuring equality in regional dissemination. Moreover, the exclusive reliance on a single competitive foundation in Lithuania renders the system inherently unstable and offers no viable alternatives.

Based on heritage practitioners' perspectives, the investigation of state support measures has resulted in the following recommendations for ICH policy:

1) in the economy:

The competitive model for LCC funding and state economic support systems should be combined with the strategic aim of preserving the diversity of cultural expressions, with greater attention given to the specific, and sometimes unique, economic needs of ICH activities;

2) in education, science and informatics:

a) support should include passing on specialised knowledge to communities that lack it, with priority given to continuous training and capacity-building within state and municipal programmes and projects aimed at preserving and actualising ICH. Such activities could also take the form of annual camps, long-term workshops, and festivals;

b) support for communities should extend beyond promoting participation to cover areas outside their competence, such as increasing media visibility, raising cultural and scientific awareness of ICH's value, and providing assistance with legal and administrative issues;

c) a comprehensive, long-term national strategy for study and scientific research in the field of ICH safeguarding is needed;

d) permanent exhibitions in national museums should provide stronger representation of ICH traditions;

3) in society:

a) it is essential to enhance the understanding and awareness of ICH among state and societal entities, including governmental and non-governmental organisations in order to create an environment that fosters collaboration, dialogue, and negotiation through exchange networks;

b) effective collaboration in safeguarding and actualising ICH values is essential, requiring mobilisation and support for communities. Every national ICH value should be represented by the relevant organised communities or institutions, with access to digital platforms for communication. Regular experience sharing and active networking should become integral to the process of actualising ICH.

c) the state should begin paying greater attention to community leaders and outstanding individuals, i.e. those with influencers, while continuing to support ICH community activities.

This signifies the necessity for a complex approach to enhanced inter-communal and inter-institutional collaboration, as well as the improvement of knowledge-sharing, education and research opportunities, and economic incentives.

Notes

¹ The Council for the Safeguarding of Ethnic Culture appeal to the Ministry of Culture and LCC, regarding Lithuanian Council of Culture-funded projects that focus on preserving and promoting Lithuania's folk culture and intangible cultural heritage, 03/02/2023, No S–39.

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