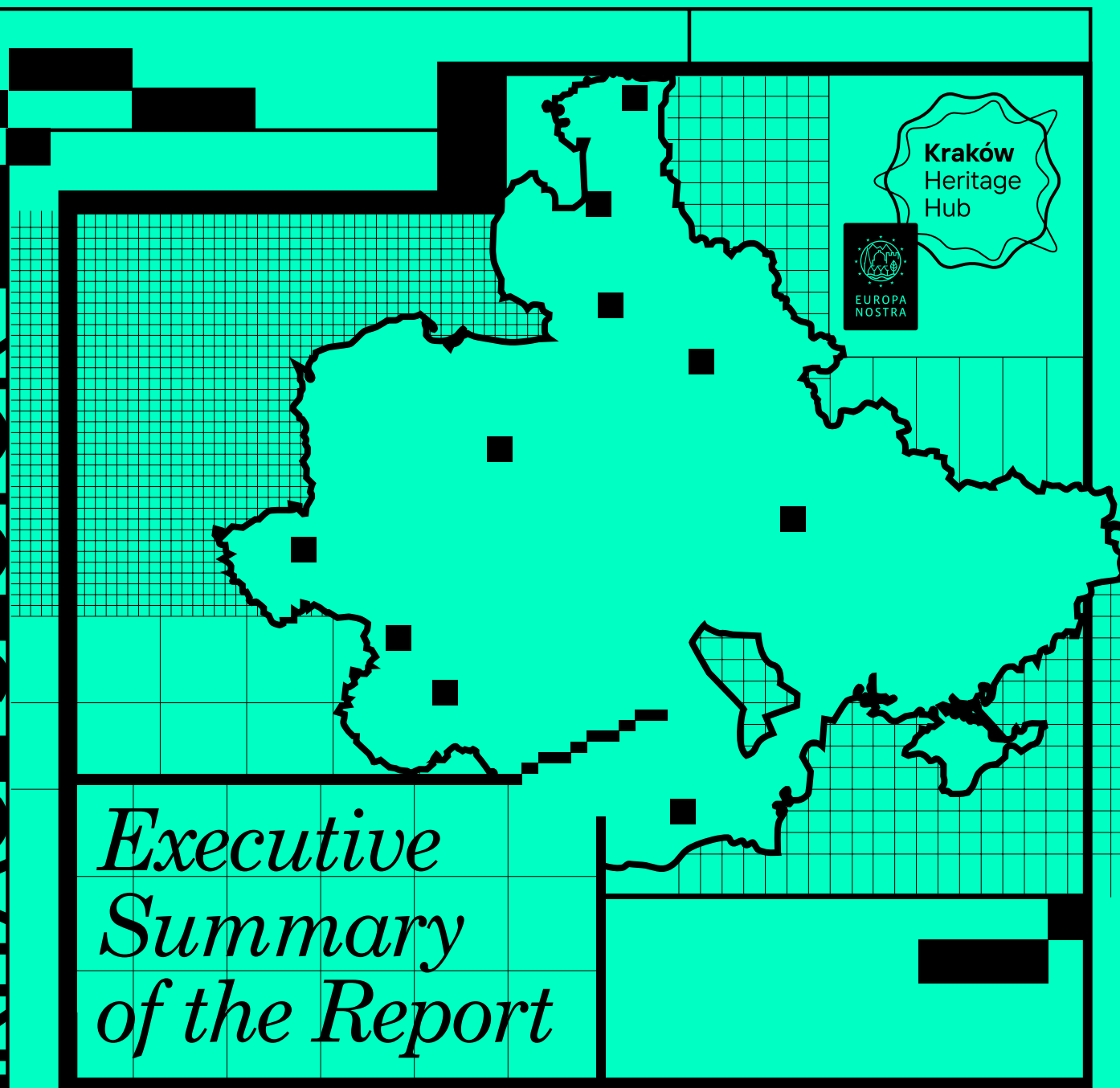


MAPPING OF THE CENTRAL

AND EASTERN EUROPEAN

HERITAGE SECTOR

NON-GOVERNMENTAL



The report “Mapping of the Central and Eastern European non-governmental heritage sector” presents the findings of the first comprehensive mapping of the non-governmental heritage sector in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), conducted between November 2023 and March 2025, which covers ten countries: Belarus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine. It was prepared by the Europa Nostra Heritage Hub for Central and Eastern Europe in Kraków, in cooperation with Centrum Cyfrowe in Warsaw, as part of the broader European Heritage Hub initiative funded by the European Union.

The research project responds to a pressing knowledge gap: despite the growing visibility of heritage NGOs and their essential contribution to safeguarding, interpreting, and reimagining Europe’s diverse cultural and natural heritage, no systematic comparative study has, until now, attempted to map this vibrant sector across the CEE region. The findings are exploratory but robust, drawing on a carefully designed and triangulated methodology combining desk research, quantitative data analysis, an online survey completed by 290 NGOs, 18 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, and 21 group discussions (“roundtables”) with six to eight practitioners in each country conducted throughout 2024. Ten country facilitators supported the data collection.

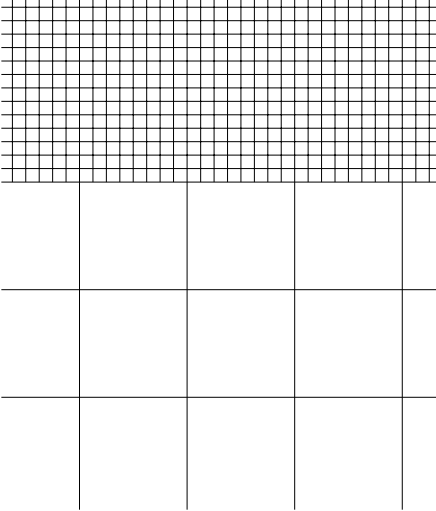
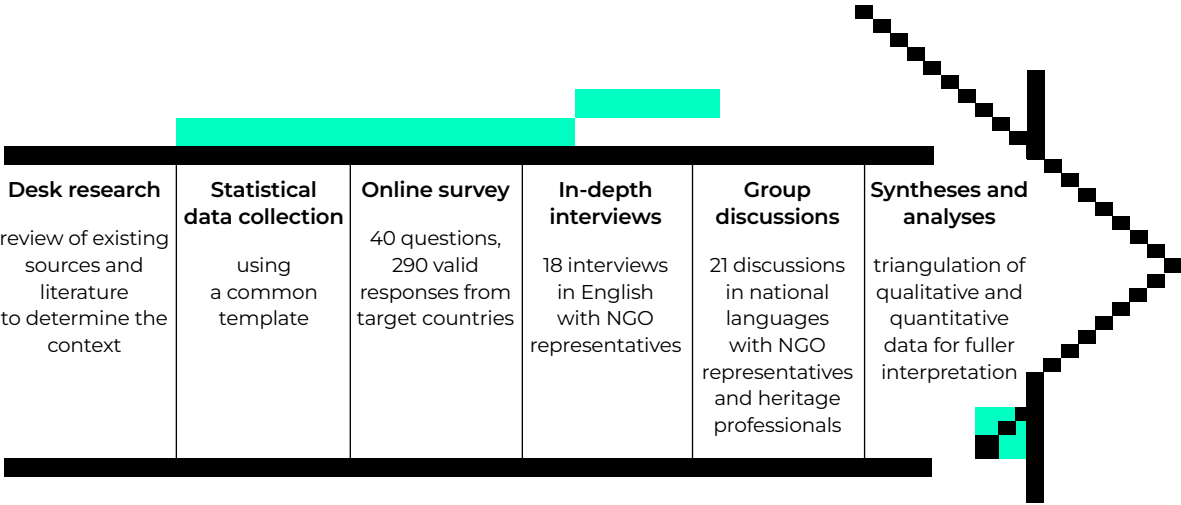


Figure 1.
Outline of research tools used



A Fragmented but Dynamic Sector

The study estimates that approximately 33,500 non-governmental organisations across the region are engaged in heritage-related activities. For the purposes of the research they were defined as follows:

A multidimensional civil steward of heritage; a non-governmental organisation in the field of heritage whose activities make an important contribution to the protection, management, and promotion of cultural and natural heritage, tangible, intangible and digital, on a local, national, international, or intercultural level. Its multifaceted efforts extend across various domains, from restoration and documentation, research, education, and capacity building, developing awareness of heritage values, and guarding of cultural identity, (re-)interpreting and using heritage, engaging and empowering communities to advocacy, broking, and rallying support for heritage policy changes.

Table 1. Estimation of the size of the heritage NGO sector in various countries

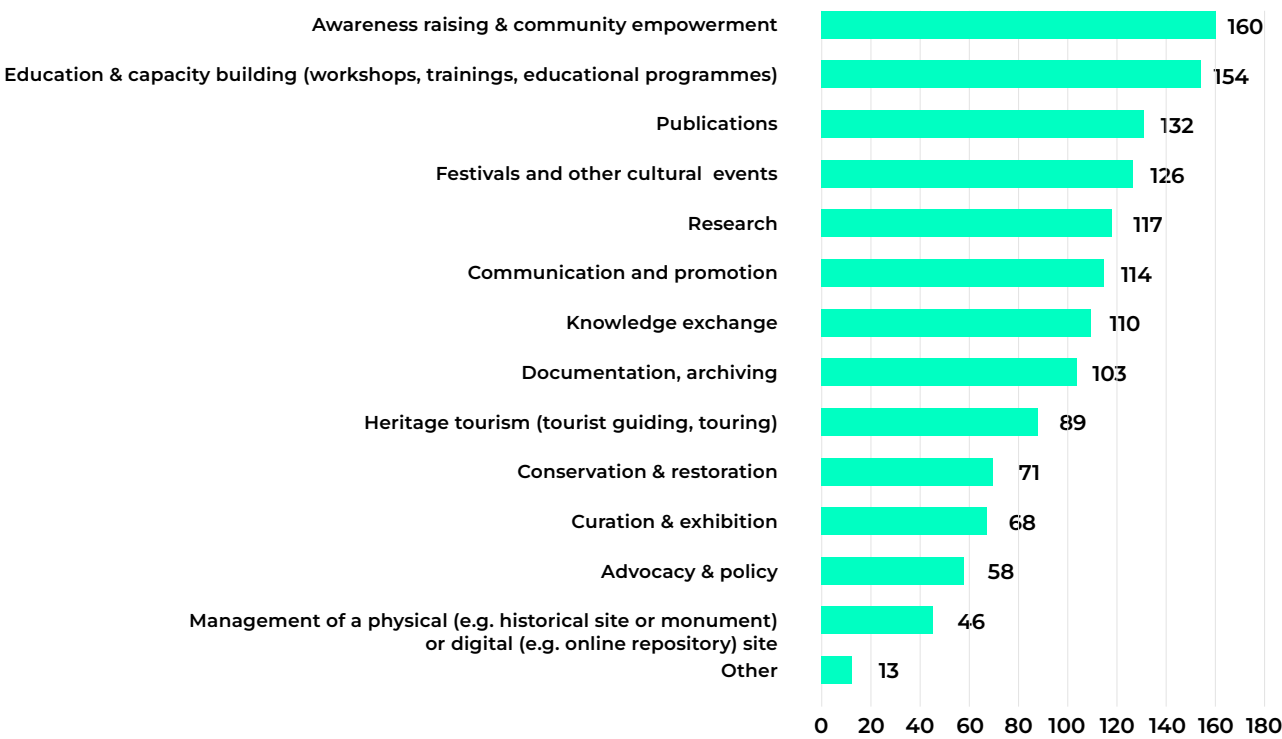
Country	Total no. of NGOs	Basis for the selection as a heritage NGO	Estimated no. of heritage NGOs	Legal forms	Year of publishing of provided data
Belarus	5 961	Facilitator’s estimates ¹ (no selection of heritage as the field of activity in the registers)	300	Associations and association unions; foundations; private establishments; religious communities	2023
Czechia	55 950	Facilitator’s estimates ¹ (for selected legal forms, no selection of heritage as the field of activity) in the registers	2 200 (incl. associations; foundations; public benefit corporations)	Associations; foundations; institutes; public benefit corporations; church and charities organisations	2023
Estonia	45 470	Selection of NGOs active in folk culture amateur groups, museums, churches and congregations; plus additional calculations by the facilitator	2 368	Associations; foundations; churches and congregations	2023

Hungary	60 878	Selection based on the following fields of activity: for membership associations – culture; for foundations – culture and arts	10 019	Membership organisations (associations, public law associations, advocacy and professional organisations, trade unions, professional associations, nonprofit enterprises); foundations	2022
Latvia	26 370	Selection based on the following fields of activity: architecture and restoration; library activities; museums; folk art and intangible heritage	238	Associations; foundations	2024
Lithuania	2 205	Selection based on the following fields of activity: culture and leisure	1 162	Public institutions; associations; foundations	2024
Poland	101 500	Selection based on the following fields of activity: culture and arts	13 800	Registered and ordinary associations; foundations; farmers’ wives associations; social religious entities	2022
Romania	139 394	Facilitator’s estimates ¹ (no selection of heritage as the field of activity in the registers)	1 612	Associations; foundations; federations	2024
Slovakia	69 283	Facilitator’s estimates ¹ (no selection of heritage as the field of activity in the registers)	1 500	Non-investment funds; organisations with the international element; foundations; non-profit organisations providing generally beneficial services; civic association	2024
Ukraine	78 168	Facilitator’s estimates ¹ (no selection of heritage as the field of activity in the registers)	387	Public organisations; public associations; charitable organisations; charitable foundations	2024

¹ Country reports in the Annex explain in detail the estimation or calculation performed by the relevant country facilitator.

Source: Authors’ and facilitators’ own calculations

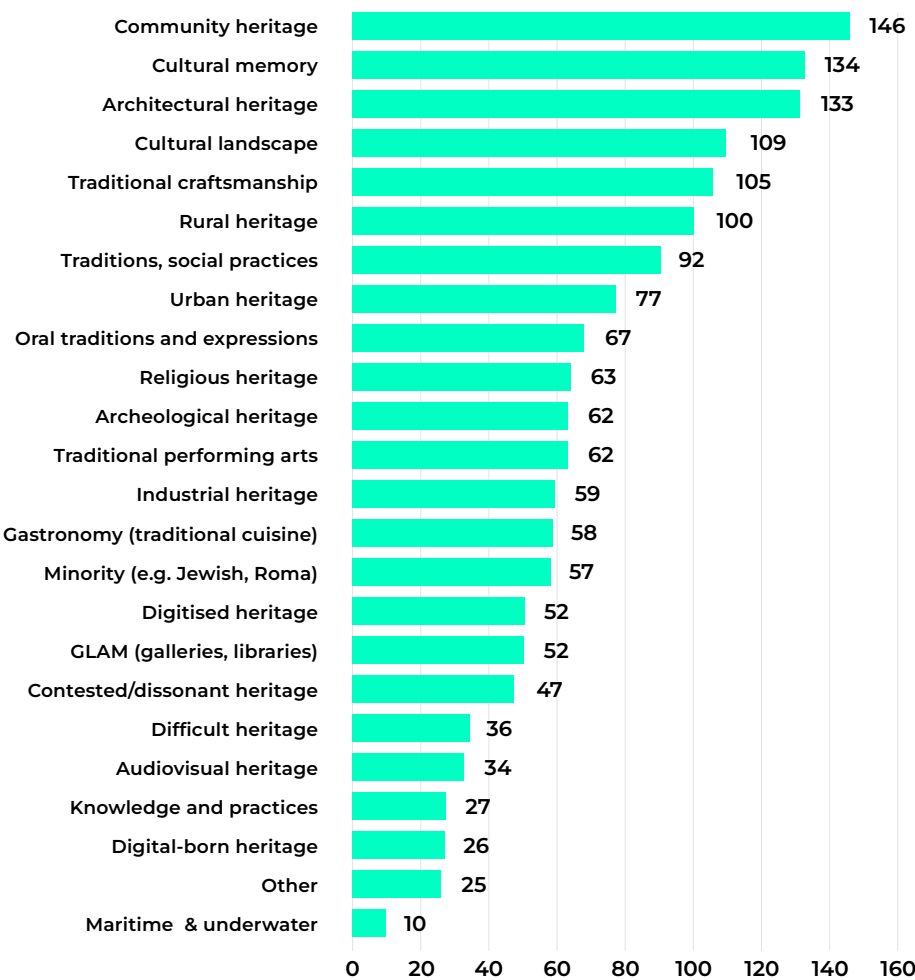
Figure 2.
Areas of activities of heritage NGOs
in Central and Eastern Europe



Source: Survey data

These organisations range from small, volunteer-driven initiatives rooted in local traditions and community memory, to professionalised NGOs managing major restoration projects, archives, or educational programmes. While the sector’s diversity is a strength, it also contributes to its institutional invisibility, as there is no common legal or statistical framework for identifying and supporting heritage-focused NGOs in most national contexts.

Figure 3.
Heritage domains of interest for heritage NGOs
in Central and Eastern Europe according to the
number of indications in the survey



Source: Survey data

Most organisations are formally registered as associations or foundations, though informal civic initiatives, church-affiliated groups, rural women’s circles, and other hybrid entities are also significant actors. The NGOs operate across a broad spectrum of heritage domains, with cultural heritage dominating (including tangible, intangible, and digital forms), while natural heritage is less frequently cited. Activities span restoration, education, research, advocacy, community engagement, and the safeguarding of local traditions and memory.

Motivations Rooted in Values and Community

The research reveals a sector animated by strong intrinsic motivations. Survey respondents pointed to identity, community well-being, and knowledge-sharing as their main drivers. Economic incentives, by contrast, play a minimal role. The voices captured in interviews and roundtables repeatedly emphasised the sense of purpose, fulfilment, and emotional commitment that underpins this work. Many participants described their organisations as “spaces of care” for heritage, community, and social cohesion – despite limited recognition and precarious funding.

Volunteers form the backbone of the sector. Most NGOs operate with few or no paid staff, and rely heavily on voluntary contributions. While this fosters community ownership and resilience, it also presents significant challenges in terms of sustainability, continuity, and the risk of burnout – especially among younger or newer entrants to the field. Furthermore, there is a perceived lack of recognition and support from both governmental bodies and the public, which affects their ability to advocate for heritage preservation effectively.



il. 1. Craft experience workshops at the Serfenta studio.
Photo by Michelle Altaner-Frat.

Serfenta Association based in Cieszyn (Poland) contributes to the continuity of intangible heritage by raising awareness and popularising traditional skills and techniques, transmitting knowledge and encouraging people to make their own objects according to traditional methods. Serfenta promotes the values and qualities of traditional basketry crafts, making this intangible heritage vivid, attractive, and useful to modern people.

Table 2.
Motivation for working in the NGO heritage sector by number of indications

Motivator	Not at all	A little	A lot
Leisure The main driver for my engagement is associated with pleasure, enjoyment and spending quality time coming from the fact of being part of a heritage-focused NGO	58	101	99
Social interaction I am involved because I want to associate with other people, create a contact network, and spend time in a group of people who share similar interests	18	74	166
Identity I am involved because I identify with the institution and with the ethical/social values it embraces, or feel an urge to feel connected with a group, project or values	12	42	204
Personal well-being I engage in activities that bring me personal satisfaction, help me relate to a particular group	54	91	113
Community well-being I engage as a team player. It brings me satisfaction to see our group cooperating together, supporting each other and caring and thus also contributing to a positive change	12	58	188
Professional interaction I am involved to use and/or share my knowledge and skills to support the institution and/or its project on a professional basis and create a network of professional contacts	27	69	162
Knowledge My main driver is acquiring new knowledge/skills, and having a chance to self-improve	8	68	182
Creativity I am involved because I want and like to create new goods or services or ideas	18	73	167
Economic My main motivation is to help the institution to make profit, gain benefits, improve efficiency, and attract new audiences	103	96	59

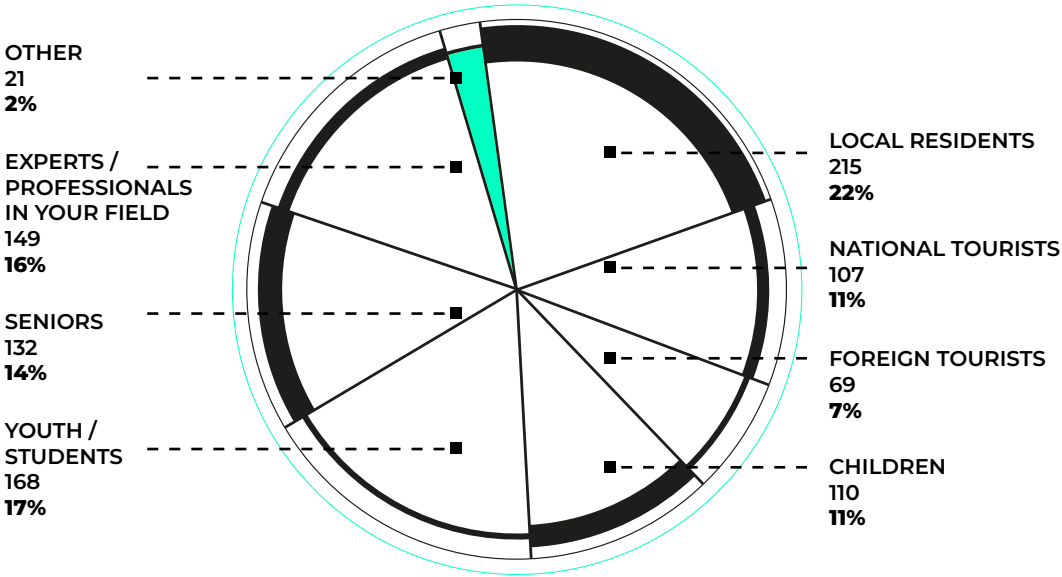
Source: Survey data

Funding: A Fragile Ecosystem

Access to financial resources varies widely across the region but is universally fragile. Public grants – primarily from national or local governments – form the core of most NGOs’ funding portfolios. Private donations, membership fees, and occasional commercial activities (such as publications, guided tours, or workshops) also contribute. However, dependence on short-term project funding, a lack of core financing, and the absence of philanthropic cultures (a legacy of the communist regimes across the region) or supportive fiscal frameworks in many countries all contribute to systemic insecurity.

Many NGOs report difficulties accessing EU or international funds due to administrative burdens, lack of co-financing, or language and capacity barriers. Furthermore, recent political developments in some countries have introduced additional obstacles, including attempts to restrict access to foreign funding, stigmatisation of civic activism, or reduced transparency in public grant allocation.

Figure 4.
Target groups for heritage NGOs’ activities



Source: Survey data

Insufficient Recognition

A major problem of the heritage sector turns out to be insufficient recognition on behalf of authorities, as well as society in a broader sense. Raising awareness of the role of heritage professionals is a key to address a number of challenges, including funding, state support and bureaucratic constrains. Work in the NGO heritage sector is far too often considered an unpaid mission, both by representatives of the sector and surrounding *milieux*.



il. 2. Skovoroda Museum. Hryhorii Skovoroda was a central figure of the Ukrainian 17th century philosophy and a prominent figure in Ukrainian history. The museum in Skovorodynivka, Kharkiv region, memorialised the place where he died and was buried. In May 2022, the Russian military hit the museum with a direct rocket attack. The documentation was performed shortly after the damage. Drone footage.

HeMo (Ukraine) is an organisation which monitors and documents damage done to built cultural heritage in Ukraine by Russian forces following the outbreak of the full-scale war in 2022. As of 17 January 2024, HeMo has inspected some 784 objects in 13 Ukrainian regions (oblasts). The documentation which is gathered by HeMo is shared with the Ukrainian military and is to be used as evidence in criminal proceedings against the Russian Federation.

**Challenge for
Balance and
Wellbeing**

Burnout is the most widespread word that was mentioned in interviews and discussions. Challenges and constraints of working in the sector, a daily struggle for survival and solving problems which are a common hinderance to programme activities, very often result in a loss of energy and impetus, increasing self-doubt in any attempts at meaning and success. Stress management and learning to keep a balance between work and private life only partly addresses the problem; any lasting change of the situation is only possible when the heritage sector will gain wider recognition across the board.



il. 3. Trail marking in Petnic, Caraş-Severin county.
Photo by Mircea Gherase.

[Via Transilvanica](#) (Romania) is the flagship project of Tășuleasa Social, a Romanian NGO which is dedicated to volunteering as well as educational, social, environmental and cultural activities. The main project, Via Transilvanica, is a 1,400 km hiking trail which traverses the country, taking in over 400 communities and 12 UNESCO World Heritage sites. The trail was inaugurated in 2022 after four years of preparations which involved over 10,000 volunteers nationwide. In 2023, Via Transilvanica was awarded with a European Heritage Award / Europa Nostra Award in the Citizens Engagement and Awareness-raising category, as well as the Public Choice Award.



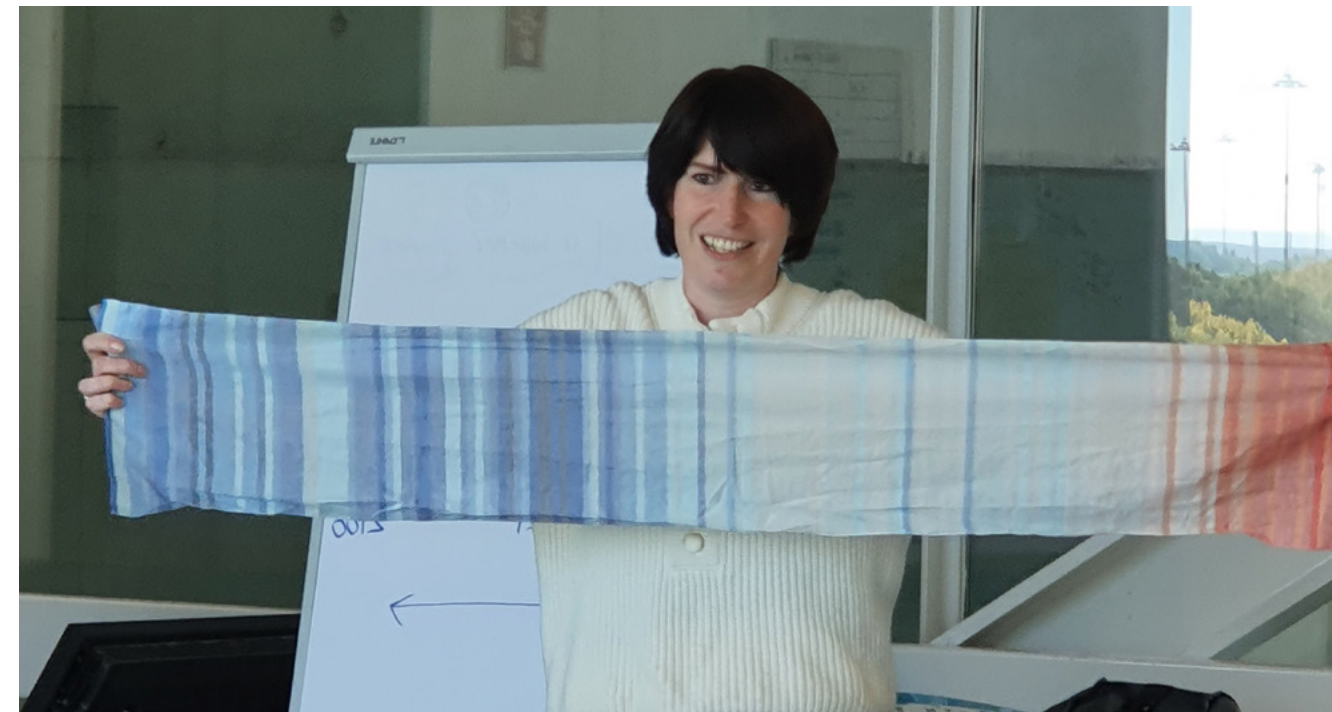
il. 4. Summer School of “Un-archiving Post Industry” project in Pokrovsk Historical Museum, Donetsk region, 2021.
Photo from the Lviv Center for Urban History archive.

[The Lviv Center for Urban History](#) (Ukraine) is an independent organisation which researches synergies at the cross-section of public history and digital media, as well as providing public outreach programmes. A flagship project, it runs the Urban Media Archive, an online resource of around 30,000 images, videos and films, oral histories, maps, as well as other digitised documents of cultural significance. The project entitled “[Un-archiving Post Industry](#)” was run in cooperation with St. Andrew’s University, UK, in 2019 and was granted a European Heritage Award / Europa Nostra Award in 2023.



il. 5. Viscri houses Nos. 138, 139 and 140. Photo presents the first authentic community space in a Transylvanian village. In 2004 the Mihai Eminescu Trust renovated the façade of the house No. 139 and since then the owner has continued the work himself. The façade is only made of lime and natural colour, this is why it needs to be redone every four-five years. House No. 140 (light green) is a big Mihai Eminescu Trust project entitled “Our house Viscri No. 140”. It was initiated in 2025 and aims to turn the building into a public multifunctional space for the community and for visitors. Photo from the Mihai Eminescu Trust archive.

[The Mihai Eminescu Trust Foundation](#) (Romania) was established in 2000 in the Transylvanian village of Viscri as a continuation of activities undertaken by the Mihai Eminescu Trust London, established in 1987 to counter Ceaușescu’s systematisation plan and to save thousands of Romanian villages. The foundation operates in the specific context of Saxon villages, which after the 1989 revolution became largely depopulated thanks to the mass emigration of its former inhabitants to Germany, as well as full of heritage sites in need of restoration and revitalisation. The concept that stands behind the foundation’s activities is called the “Whole Village”. It is a holistic approach which aims to revitalise local communities and improve their quality of life through responsible projects maintaining cultural and natural heritage, involving local human resources, as well as the use of traditional knowledge, tools and techniques.



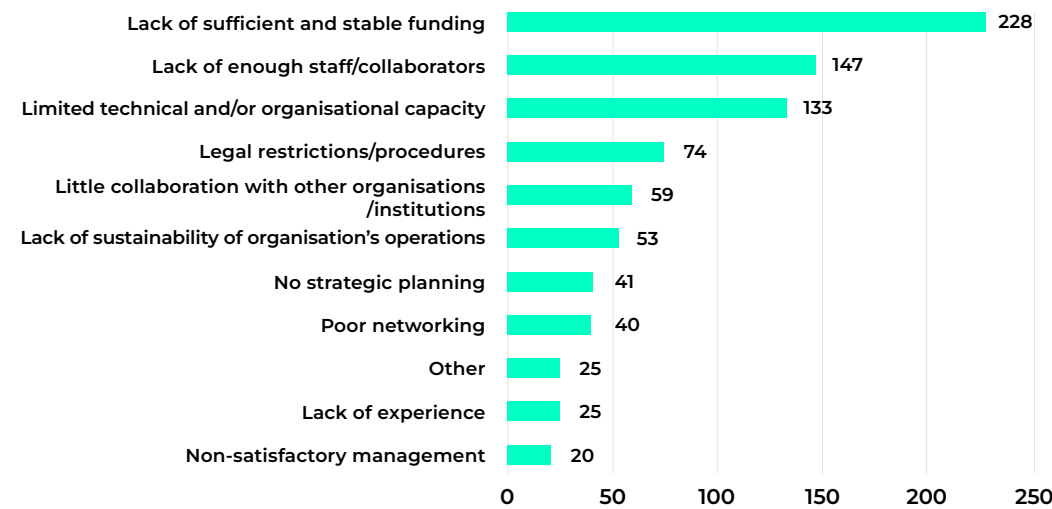
il. 6. PRO-Heritage “Train the Trainer” workshop, 4 November 2021, Museu Nacional dos Coches (Portuguese National Museum of Coaches), Lisbon. Participant holding the global warming graphic showing rising annual global temperatures from 1850–2017; this was to illustrate the increasing impact of climate change on the performance of historic buildings, requiring informed maintenance and management. Photo by Graham Bell.

[The Hungarian Renaissance Foundation](#) (Hungary) (MRA) is an NGO founded in 2007 and is based in Budapest. The MRA was set up on the same model at the UK organisation which is run by Graham Bell when a risk arose in the old Jewish quarter of Budapest that a number of old buildings would be demolished with consent given by the district mayor. Following on from that experience, Graham Bell set up an organisation based in Hungary which would become a voice of cultural heritage in the country.

Representatives of the heritage sector across the researched countries mention a lack of or insufficient collaboration: between the NGOs themselves as well as with institutions and private sector. They stay wrapped within their own organisations and environments, rather than reach out. Among the reasons for the trend is an overload of work and the necessity to look for new funding opportunities which could financially secure their existence. Networking, in turn, could facilitate programme activities and organisation of work.

***Towards
Collaboration***

Figure 5.
Key challenges currently
faced by NGOs*



*The chart shows the number of distinctive responses, whether provided as a singular response or as part of a combined response (more than one challenge mentioned per NGO)

Source: Survey data

***Challenges
of Operating
in a Politically
Volatile Landscape***

The political and legal environment for NGOs varies considerably across the region. In countries such as Belarus and, to a lesser extent, Hungary and Slovakia, the civic space has narrowed significantly in recent years, with legal restrictions, bureaucratic harassment, and politicised discourse undermining the work of many independent organisations. In Belarus, following a widespread crackdown in 2021, many NGOs were forcibly dissolved, and heritage professionals continue to face criminalisation, exile, or a need to operate underground.

In Ukraine, the ongoing war has dramatically reshaped the sector's role. NGOs have emerged as key actors in the emergency protection of cultural heritage, documentation of damage, and coordination of international support. However, their work is often hampered by security risks, corruption, and limited institutional backing from public authorities. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian heritage NGO sector demonstrates a remarkable agility and high level of trust within professional communities.

Other countries in the region – particularly in the Baltics and parts of Central Europe – offer relatively more constructive environments, yet NGOs still struggle with under-recognition, underfunding, and administrative burdens.

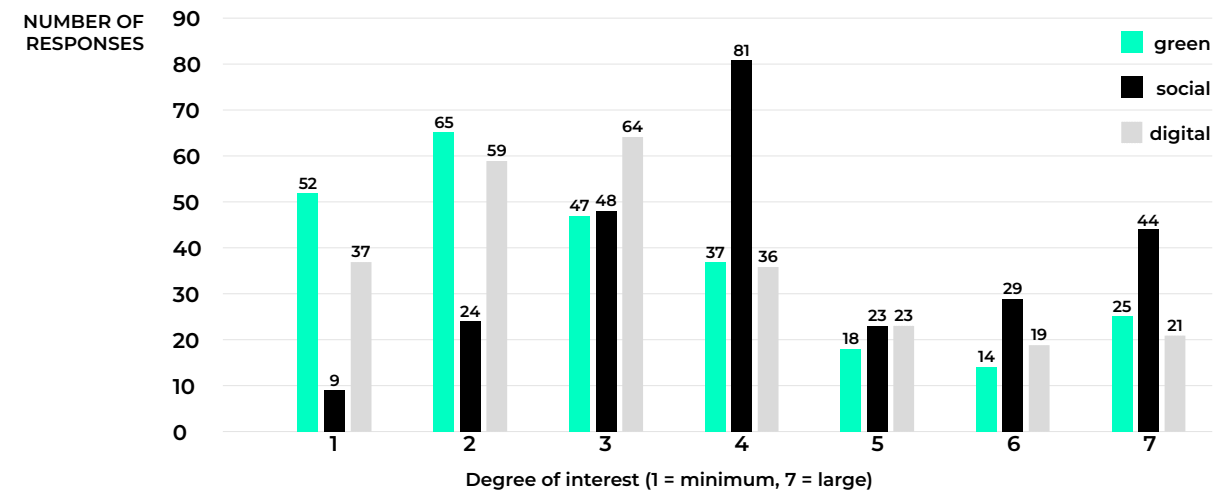
The report explores how heritage NGOs engage with the so-called “triple transformation” (social, digital, and green), a concept promoted at EU and OECD levels. The mapping finds that:

- Social transformation is central to many NGOs’ missions, particularly those working with memory, inclusion, and community-based heritage.
- Digital transformation remains uneven, with limited resources and skills acting as barriers, though some organisations have made progress in digitisation and virtual outreach activities.
- Green transformation is the least developed area. Although environmental concerns are increasingly recognised, few heritage NGOs are systematically integrating sustainability into their core missions or operations.

These findings point to an urgent need for capacity-building, exchange of best practices, and policy support to ensure the sector can actively contribute to Europe’s broader transformation agendas.

***The Triple
Transformation:
Social, Digital,
and Green***

Figure 6.
NGO engagement
in triple transformation



Source: Survey data

Towards a Strategic Agenda for Support

The report concludes with a diagnosis of key needs and strategic directions for strengthening the heritage NGO sector in the CEE region:

1. Recognition – Heritage NGOs must be recognised as essential actors in both cultural policy and civil society development.
2. Sustainable funding – More flexible and long-term funding mechanisms are necessary to support organisational stability and innovation.
3. Wellbeing and burnout prevention – Structural investment is needed in the care, training, and professional development of heritage workers.
4. Generational renewal – Addressing leadership transitions and attracting younger generations are critical for sectoral continuity.
5. Capacity building – Training, mentoring, and knowledge exchange at national and transnational levels can foster innovation and resilience.
6. Support for implementation – Beyond ideas, NGOs need technical assistance and organisational infrastructure to translate vision into practice.

A Foundation for Future Research and Action

While the study is exploratory in nature and based on a pilot-scale methodology, it offers the most comprehensive snapshot to date of the heritage NGO landscape in Central and Eastern Europe. It highlights both the sector’s resilience and the structural vulnerabilities it faces.

Importantly, the report lays a foundation for future research and policy-making. It calls for the development of more harmonised and transparent data collection across the region, the establishment of regional and thematic networks, and increased visibility for heritage NGOs within the European civil society ecosystem.

In doing so, it positions the Europa Nostra Heritage Hub in Kraków as a catalyst for greater regional cooperation and a stronger voice for the many dedicated individuals and organisations working to ensure that heritage remains a living, inclusive, and transformative force in Central and Eastern Europe.



il. 7. “Toy Clinic” exhibition (2021/2022). Primary school pupils visit the exhibition hosted by Marek Sosenko, founder of the Sosenko family collection. All group and individual visits at the exhibition were hosted by one of the collectors to ensure an exceptional experience of stepping into the “cabinet of curiosities”. Photo by Katarzyna Jagodzińska.

[Toy Museum in Kraków](#) (Poland) was established by The Sosenko Family Collection Foundation as a nomadic project realised in temporary locations, based on the philosophy of a participatory museum: co-created by the public, inclusive, and open. The museum has since become an active player in public debates on topical issues of the contemporary agenda – including climate change, sustainability, migration, equality – by raising awareness, animating discussions, indicating possible solutions or activities which could be implemented in everyday life. Historic toys are presented not as objects which present a childhood narrative, but invoke ideas in a much broader conversation and joint action.



il. 8. Railway Museum in Silesia in Jaworzyna Śląska, opened in 2005. Overview of the main railway buildings with historic locomotives and rolling stock. Photo by Przemysław Durr.

The Foundation for the Protection of the Industrial Heritage of Silesia (Poland) was established in 2004 by Dr. Piotr Gerber. He is a leading personality in Poland who is totally committed to the protection and preservation of industrial heritage, still the most commonly neglected area of material heritage. Gerber's entire professional career has resulted in raising awareness of the cultural and historical value of former industrial buildings, and was instrumental in the prevention of the demolition of numerous priceless examples of historic architecture. The Foundation, of which he is the president, protects and manages a growing number of industrial facilities in two regions of Poland – Lower and Upper Silesia. Gerber's main concern is to preserve the authenticity of industrial facilities, their completeness and understanding of their original purpose.

The full report is available at <https://heritagehubkrakow.org/project/mapping>

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The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, the interviewees, the discussion participants, and/or the facilitators involved in the research process. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

The project was conducted by the Europa Nostra Heritage Hub for Central and Eastern Europe in Kraków in collaboration with Centrum Cyfrowe in Warsaw.

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Kraków 2025



Mapping of the Central and Eastern European non-governmental heritage sector: Report presents the findings of the first comprehensive mapping of the non-governmental heritage sector in Central and Eastern Europe, conducted in 2023–2025, which covers ten countries: Belarus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

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The study estimates that approximately 33,500 NGOs across the region are engaged in heritage-related activities.

Key findings on the NGO heritage sector in Central and Eastern Europe

- A fragmented but dynamic sector
- Motivation rooted in community values
- A fragile ecosystem in terms of funding
- Insufficient recognition
- Challenge for wellbeing
- Insufficient intra- and inter-sectoral collaboration
- Social transformation of central importance

Strategic Agenda for Support: A diagnosis of key needs and strategic directions for strengthening the heritage NGO sector

- Recognition of heritage NGO work and value
- Sustainable funding
- Wellbeing and burnout prevention
- Generational renewal
- Capacity building
- Support for project implementation

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