

# Cultural Landscapes of Energy

Constructing Histories of Power,  
Prosperity, and Decline in Europe

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## **10 Integrating Minority Perspectives into the Heritagisation of Post-Mining Landscapes in Lusatia, Germany**

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# 10 Integrating Minority Perspectives into the Heritagisation of Post-Mining Landscapes in Lusatia, Germany

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In the Eastern German region of Lusatia, there is a place called ‘Wolkenberg,’ which can be translated as ‘cloudy hill.’ To reach this place, we must walk to the top of a gently rising hill. The path is lined with young plants, including slender locust trees scattered here and there. Each and every plant appears to have been intentionally placed. We immediately sense that we are walking through a carefully designed landscape. At the top of the hill, we enjoy a wide-angled view of a recently established vineyard that serves the wine made there in the summer, revealing why most of the visitors are here. We sit down to enjoy a glass of wine and let our eyes wander further. Close by, forests and fields stretch out across the landscape, but further away to the right, a huge machine is working its way through the landscape, thoroughly churning up the soil. In the distance, and to the left of the colossal machine are two power plants spitting out clouds of steam into the sky. We now finally realise that everything around us—from the hill, to the vineyard, to the forests and fields—is a landscape of energy, shaped by the generation of electricity and therefore constantly changing. The machine is an excavator that is digging for lignite, which is fed to the power plants to generate warmth and electricity.

Behind us, the history of the devastated village of Wolkenberg is presented at a memorial site. Until 1992, Wolkenberg was situated right where we are standing. We learn that people lived here from at least the thirteenth century and that during most of the village’s history, they spoke not only German but also Sorbian, a West Slavic language, and named the place ‘Klěšnik.’<sup>1</sup>

The site evokes a certain feeling of dissonance within the visitor: The ‘Sorbianness’ of the landscape, that is, its interweavings with Sorbian cultural practices throughout the region’s past and present, is fully positioned in the pre-industrial past and remains within the confines of the memorial site. However, the area’s recultivation as a vineyard—originally supported by the former mining operator, Vattenfall, in the mid-2000s—and its cultural and economic as well as touristic value support a narrative of a successfully reappropriated post-mining landscape. This dichotomy between the ‘Sorbian’ and ‘industrial’ aspects of the landscape’s past has strongly characterised both regional post-mining planning and Lusatia’s self-image to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Grounded in these observations, this chapter discusses the heritagisation of post-mining landscapes with a focus on the Sorbian minority. Today, the Sorbs are one of the four legally recognised minorities in Germany (after the Sinti and Roma, the Danish minority, and the West-Frisian minority). At the close of the nineteenth century, approximately two-thirds of their historical and current areas of settlement overlapped with the Lusatian open-cast mining area, and more than half of the population of this area self-identified as Sorbian and spoke this language.<sup>3</sup> The landscape is deeply marked by ruptures, continuities, and imbrications of ‘Sorbian’ and ‘industrial’ dimensions. Therefore, our aim is to reflect on how these aspects can be integrated into the process of valuing the post-mining landscape. We also ask how, in this context, Lusatia’s regional identity is being re-negotiated and how it could ultimately be made more diverse and inclusive through reorientation towards the minority specificity. These questions have become especially important, as the German government decided to phase out lignite mining by 2038 at the latest, leading to a profoundly transformative process in the region.

Our insights stem from a literature review of historical research on minority rights, traditional land use systems, recultivation, mining law, resettlement, and memory culture within Lusatia; site visits; and interviews conducted between 2020 and 2024. We conducted issue-focused expert interviews with local historians as well as non-structured and problem-centred expert interviews with Sorbian stakeholders/representatives at different levels. The framework for our study is an interdisciplinary research initiative, which supports and reflects on current approaches to achieve UNESCO World Heritage status for Lusatia’s post-mining landscape. The Sorbian Institute/Serbski institut (SI) is one of the five partners engaged in this endeavour.<sup>4</sup> The initiative was initially developed by representatives from the Brandenburg Ministry of Science, Research and Culture (Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur, MWFK), the Brandenburg University of Technology (Brandenburgisch-Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg, BTU), Branitz Park (a garden in Cottbus, created by the local prince of Pückler-Muskau during the second half of the nineteenth century), the Humboldt Forum Berlin, and the Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art.

Towards this end, a tentative application was submitted at the national level in 2021 by the MWFK jointly with the Saxonian Ministry for Regional Development (Sächsisches Staatsministerium für Regionalentwicklung, SMR). However, at the German Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz) held in December 2022, it was decided that the post-mining landscape of Lusatia would not be included in Germany’s tentative list of future UNESCO World Heritage nominations. The main arguments leading to its rejection were inadequate protection mechanisms for the landscape, the incomplete demarcation of the proposed area, and insufficiently clear communication of its value-bearing features in their context. A key issue focused on how the increasing usage of renewable energies within the landscape itself or within its sightlines would be dealt with.<sup>5</sup>

This feedback and its consequences for the entire initiative provide a productive opportunity for reflection on our shifting roles as researchers, heritage

makers, and part-time lobbyists for Sorbian interests, as well as the opportunities and limitations of official heritagisation processes. Few case studies within the field of heritage studies have focused on sites that are becoming or failing to become UNESCO World Heritage, especially in contexts involving minority groups. Drawing on Susemihl's work on the Tr'ondëk Klondike area in Canada,<sup>6</sup> we argue that this could be especially beneficial from a minority group's perspective, as the 'heritagisation of landscapes'<sup>7</sup> provides a field for negotiating local and often regional identities. '[P]laces are "produced" by cultural practices [such as heritagisation], and identity is constructed or produced by places. [...] So, heritage in the sense of place helps people to position themselves as a nation, community or individual and in defining their "place" in our physical world.'<sup>8</sup> It is therefore important to question how heritage can also serve as a guiding orientation for Sorbs to position themselves within Lusatia's post-mining developmental process.

To answer these questions, we briefly describe the history and terrain of our study site, namely the region of Lusatia—including Lausitzer Revier (its mining area) and its specificities—considering the overlap with the previously discussed Sorbian settlement area. We present an overview of changing approaches for engaging with aspects specific to minorities in relation to lignite mining in the region as well as their political rights in this context, the state of the (national) energy policy systems, and demographic changes. In the following section, we outline the broader framework of our research embedded within the heritage initiative, followed by a deeper analysis of the possibilities and limitations relating to the integration of a minority-adjusted perspective within the process of heritagising landscapes of energy. We demonstrate that historically evolved dynamics have structured the ways in which the 'minority issue' has been discussed and dealt with, revealing how these dynamics were also powerful in the earlier process of economic restructuring in the region. A particular focus on 'participation' forms the framework for our discussion, followed by a concluding section, which provides an outlook on future steps.

### **Lusatia, the *Lausitzer Revier*, and the Sorbian Settlement Area**

The region of Lausitz (in German) or Łużyca/Łužica (in Lower and Upper Sorbian) is located in southeastern Germany approximately 150 km south of Berlin. Within present-day Germany, it is partly located in the state of Brandenburg (Lower Lusatia) and partly in the state of Saxony (Upper Lusatia). Historically, Lusatia also included areas east of the River Oder, which now fall under Polish territory following the redrawing of borders after World War II. As we are focussing specifically on Lausitzer Revier (the Lusatian lignite mining district), we will only refer to the areas within German territory in this chapter. The mining area is bounded to the east by the River Oder (marking the border with Poland) and by the Czech Republic to the south. While the German federal government decided to phase out lignite mining in 2019, economic and political actions have been aimed at maintaining the region's role as a centre for renewable energy.<sup>9</sup> A total of 40 billion

euros has been earmarked to support all German lignite mining regions, with 17.2 billion euros allocated for Lusatia.<sup>10</sup>

Profound transformations such as the one noted above are never solely economic processes. They also challenge existing regionalisms and lead to the redefinition and reorientation of a region's identity. Regions and their identities are always also imagined communities based on shared ideas of particular spaces, their characteristics, symbols, and inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> Regional planning ultimately institutionalises these ideas but is simultaneously shaped by the conscious and unconscious ideas of the respective actors involved in this process.

In the case of Lusatia, these processes were particularly complex given the attempts to implement a minority-adjusted perspective, which both challenges and enriches current understandings of the region and its post-mining landscape. As we noted when introducing Wolkenberg/Klěšnik, Lusatia is also an area of settlement of Sorbs and has been so since the seventh century. Nevertheless, since the time of the integration of this area into Saxony in the tenth century, Lusatian rulers have been German-speaking.<sup>12</sup> Even though Sorbs made up to 35% of the urban population, as, for example, in late-medieval Bautzen/Budyšin, the German-speaking population dominated, especially in areas where urban centres developed.<sup>13</sup> In rural areas, however, Sorbian culture and languages remained highly influential in the historical process of settlement. In many communities, the majority–minority ratio of the population did not change until the turn of the twentieth century.

On the one hand, the increasing dominance of the German language at the time is linked to the emerging romantic idea of the nation, leading to German political representatives claiming its superiority even before the foundation of the German Reich in 1871.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of compulsory education led to a standardisation process, with the German language being preferred over local dialects and the native languages of other population groups, such as the Sorbs. On the other hand, the inception of open-cast mining stimulated industrial growth and fundamentally changed the relationship with the land.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the associated challenges inside as well as outside the Sorbian area stem from the evolving legal framework of mining planning in Germany. For example, the current Federal Mining Act emerged from the *Allgemeines Berggesetz für die Preussischen Staaten* (the Prussian Mining Act) introduced in 1865. It follows the principle of mining freedom and separates non-mining natural resources, such as minerals, oil, natural gas, and coal, from land ownership. Until the 1930s, the state's right over mineral resources still meant that landowners were free to negotiate the sale of land to companies privately and to make their own decisions. This also applied to the large-scale extraction of lignite, which became possible from the beginning of the twentieth century through the availability of industrial technology.

In the early twentieth century, the loss of hard coal regions after World War I was a crucial factor contributing to the growing economic relevance of lignite for Germany. In Lusatia, this led to mergers, the development of new technologies for overburden removal, the rerouting of rivers, and increased devastation of settlement structures. Neu-Laubusch/Nowy Lubuš was the first settlement to be completely devastated, with the destruction of five villages up to World War II to

*Table 10.1* Summary data on numbers of destroyed villages and resettled inhabitants sourced from Berkner and Gesprächskreis Braunkohlenplanung, *Braunkohlenplanung und Umsiedlungsproblematik*; Förster, *Verschwundene Dörfer*; Erler and Stein, *Dokumentation bergbaubedingter Umsiedlung*

<i>Period</i>	<i>Destroyed villages</i>	<i>Resettled inhabitants (registered)</i>
1924–1944	5	1,285
1945–1989	119	24,964
1990–2024	13	2,729
Total	137	28,978

enable the establishment of the Laubusch/Erika mine in 1924 (Table 10.1). Under the banner of economic autarky, and with the National Socialist regime making preparations for war, this trend was perpetuated and consolidated.<sup>16</sup> At the level of mining planning, the freedom of private landowners, and thus of a large proportion of the rural Sorbian-speaking population, to negotiate the terms of sale of private land with the representatives of the mining companies was lost. In 1934, a *Rohstoffsicherungsklausel* (raw material security clause) was enshrined within mining law, which created the possibility of compulsory expropriation as *bergrechtliche Enteignung* ('cession of land under mining law') to ensure unimpeded extraction of mineral resources. This meant that the ownership of the natural resources awarded in the mining planning proceedings was accorded higher priority than the property rights of the landowner.<sup>17</sup>

After World War II and the partitioning of Germany in 1949, not only the political situation but also the demographic situation in Lusatia changed radically due to the influx of displaced persons.<sup>18</sup> At the economic level, the production rate of the district peaked. In 1957, the Cottbus District was declared the 'Coal and Energy Centre of the GDR.'<sup>19</sup> Most of the 137 Lusatian villages were destroyed to enable lignite extraction between 1949 and 1989 (Table 10.1). Of these villages, 73% were located directly in what Arnošt Muka has termed the 'Sorbian core' and the 'transition area.'<sup>20</sup> Despite being recognised as a national minority in 1949, Sorbs were neither specifically nor systematically considered in resettlement schemes and in the re-appropriation of the post-landscape. Only selective, collectively relevant measures were implemented to compensate for and mitigate negative consequences.

In the following decades, and especially since the onset of the oil crises of the 1970s, the extraction of regional lignite increased massively, and numerous large power plants were built. These developments were accompanied by drastic landscape interventions. By the time of German reunification in 1990, the devastated area had expanded to 68.671 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 53.6% was under recultivation (Figure 10.1).<sup>21</sup>

These dramatic changes were also reflected at the level of regional identity. As in other mining regions, open-cast mining and miners became the dominant and unifying force in the forging of the region's identity within most social

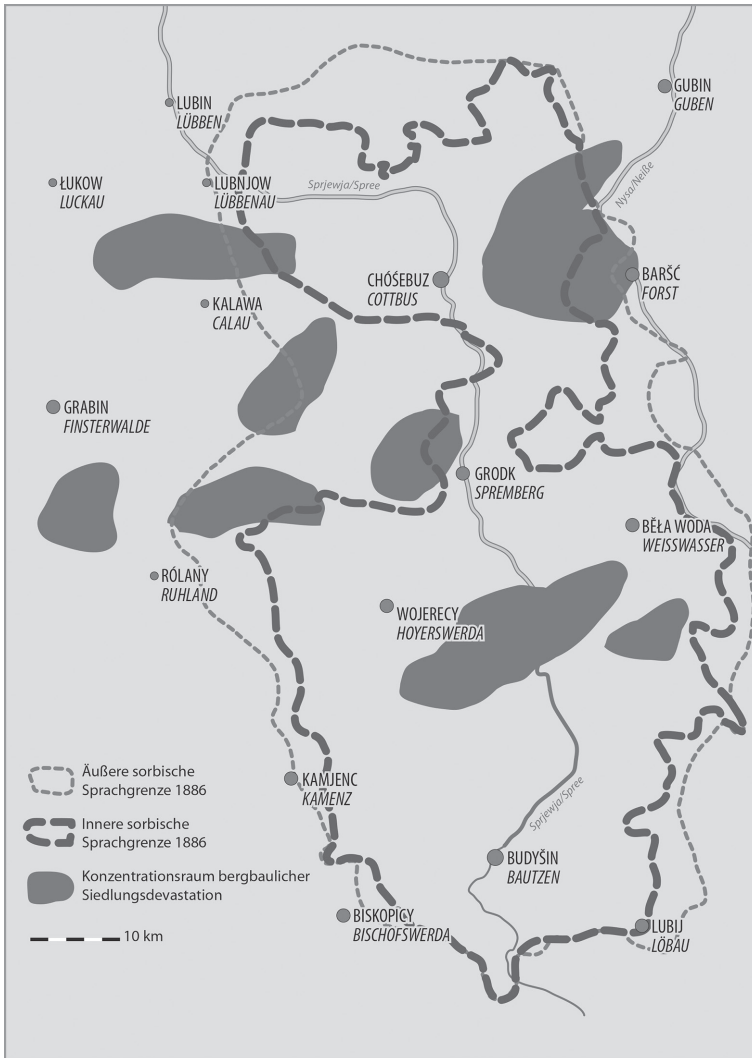


Figure 10.1 Sorbian core and transition areas overlapping with core mining areas.

Source: Frank Förster, *Verschwundene Dörfer*, 26.

discourses,<sup>22</sup> combining varying self-conceptions of new workers who moved to the area. However, this was not a linear process. Even during the twentieth century, workers in older mining areas, such as Lohsa/Łaz, maintained their rural lifestyle, whereas workers in newer areas often moved into housing estates created specifically for this purpose.<sup>23</sup>

During the post-reunification period, lignite planning was reorganised. After 1990, individual concerns relating to various protected goods (*Schutzgüter*) were incorporated within the framework of environmental and social impact assessments.<sup>24</sup> National minority rights legislation was implemented in Lusatia under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), 1998, and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Language Charter) introduced in 1999, each being adapted at the federal state level in Saxony and Brandenburg.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Sorbian political interest groups are also now consulted during the lignite planning process. However, a veto against the utilisation of settlement areas is not possible, and there is no consideration of Sorbian aspects within recultivation practices. Moreover, there are no binding rules, let alone implementation of standards for compensation measures. In light of these gaps, Sorbs have negotiated compensation measures bilaterally with the mining company outside of the planning process via DOMOWINA, their political interest group.

German reunification marked a socio-economic watershed in the formation of Lusatia as a region. The number of employees in the lignite and refining industries fell sharply, and unemployment rates above 20% were the norm in the 2000s. For example, whereas approximately 80,000 people were working in the lignite industry at the end of the 1980s, currently only around 8,700 are still employed in this and associated industries, illustrating the rapid disruption of the socio-economic structure that has taken place.<sup>26</sup> Especially since the introduction of the planned lignite phase-out, various stakeholders have been seeking a new self-understanding of the region that not only transports its mining past but also functions as a guiding principle for a post-fossil future. Thus, the aim of the tentative World Heritage application was also to explore a future-orientated identity of the region as an outstanding example of innovation by raising awareness of technological and scientific achievements in dealing with the post-mining landscape.

### **The ‘Minority Issue’ in Lusatian’s Post-Mining Heritage**

In light of his work in Indigenous contexts, George Nicholas identified seven challenges entailed in the protection of minoritised objects, places, and values,<sup>27</sup> which can be easily adapted to characterise the consequences of mining for Sorbian cultural practices. The heritagisation of the post-mining landscape does not and cannot respond to all of these challenges or mitigate the consequences of mining. Even though the tentative World Heritage application has been rejected, these two sources of Lusatian regional identity—Sorbian and industrial—can be linked together within the heritage initiative, and their transformation can be thematised. In other recent regional planning processes, the Sorbian language is apparently being gradually established as an integral, living, and unique part of Lusatia.<sup>28</sup> This development enables Sorbian stakeholders to implement at least some of the measures suggested by Nicholas for handling identified challenges, of which ‘safeguarding [...] intellectual property [...] [and] knowledge licencing and sharing [...]’<sup>29</sup> are currently priorities.

Our initiative is part of a transdisciplinary network funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, BMBF) to develop ecologically sustainable solutions for challenges related to climate change within and beyond the region. As one of the few projects associated with the ‘cultural landscape’ thematic complex, the World Heritage application thus functioned here as a reaction to structural change relating to the de-industrialisation process. The funding structure itself is not remarkable, as governments usually take a leading role in the preservation of heritage or other cultural goods.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, as Nguyen and Phan concluded on the basis of their work in Vietnam, it is usually minoritised heritage which ‘does not receive adequate conservation resources as equally as other kinds of [nationally marked] heritage do.’<sup>31</sup> In our case, this applies not only to heritage as such but also to the research associated with it. It is because of the SI’s engagement in advance of the initiative’s commencement that it has been able to act as an equal research partner, receiving the same amount of financial support as our other partners.

As researchers engaged in heritage initiatives, we find ourselves in the complex position of being what Helmut Groschwitz describes as ‘cultural brokers.’<sup>32</sup> While our research on the ruptures, continuities, and interconnections of Sorbian and industrial cultures first and foremost follows a scientific approach, as official heritage makers, we simultaneously defined and selected Sorbian elements to include in the application. We also engaged in communication and cooperation with Sorbian interest groups. Therefore, we constantly switch between our roles as critical humanities scholars, official heritage makers, and lobbyists for Sorbian interests.

While reflecting on this position, we implemented various steps to include minority-adjusted perspectives in the process. The application itself focused on the post-mining landscape. Its core argument was that a very large number of technological innovations were developed for renaturalisation and recultivation in Lusatia, and, importantly, they have remained visible over a long period—over 120 years—and formed the world’s largest contiguous post-mining landscape.<sup>33</sup> The main parts of the application focused on the re-appropriation of the landscape as a nature conservation area, a recreational area, or a laboratory for new agricultural practices. Considered from a purely technical perspective, Lusatia is a globally significant example of an innovative design for a post-mining landscape. The term ‘radicality’ was repeated to express the land-grabbing nature of lignite mining and its consequences for the region’s population, and especially for those in devastated and/or resettled places, and associated consequences for Sorbian cultural practices.

This narrative is part of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) that applicants are required to elaborate on and communicate to UNESCO. However, the post-mining landscape is also characterised, above all, by movement, change, and loss of settlement structures, landscape elements, and cultural practices. We therefore focused on what was fundamentally intangible, prioritising knowledge over materiality.

During the application phase, the challenge for the overall project lay in incorporating these intangible aspects, especially the negotiation of minority rights during

the resettlement process and establishing links with pre-industrial, agricultural, and/or Sorbian cultural practices into the selection and planning of the site. This process of what Tuuli Lähdesmäki refers to as ‘placing heritage’ entails practices of typologising and mapping.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Lusatia, this process resulted in a contradictory situation whereby we first had to differentiate between Sorbian and non-Sorbian land use. Considering that the vast majority of devastated villages were predominantly Sorbian-speaking until well into the nineteenth century, it was almost impossible to distinguish between traditional Sorbian and more general historical forms of agricultural land use.

In their recent work on the heritagisation of Māori culture in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Passey and Burns emphasised what they have termed ‘bicultural heritage,’ which entails thinking and talking about ‘heritage in terms of people and place rather than previous Western-dominated hegemony of heritage objects and buildings.’<sup>35</sup> While generally endorsing their approach, rather than making a sharp distinction between ethnic groups, we tried to include Sorbian aspects as a cross-cutting theme in the UNESCO application. These aspects only became a minority heritage, and thus antithetical to the majority concept of cultural heritage, according to Györgi,<sup>36</sup> as a result of industrialisation, associated immigration, and the development of the German nation-state.

To establish Sorbian aspects as a cross-cutting theme, we extended the period under investigation to include pre-industrial phases, thereby incorporating knowledge about how traditional or pre-industrial forms of land use characterise the post-mining landscape. This knowledge encompasses visible signs of continuity as preserved landscape elements, such as agricultural buildings or settlement structures, within the post-mining landscape. As a result of the discursive dichotomisation of ‘Sorbian–pre-modern–rural’ and ‘industrial–modern–urban,’ reappropriations of the post-mining landscape reference the pre-industrial past in ways that are sometimes non-random but more often random. In 1996, for example, the former mining company, LAUBAG, restored the historic Tschuga River near Neu-Petershain/Nowe Wiki. Even if the goal was to drain open-cast mining water,<sup>37</sup> this initiative randomly restored the Tschuga as a very meaningful landmark for the Sorbian population of this area. Rarely does information presented at recultivated sites—especially at post-mining lakes—convey any knowledge about the site’s societal aspects, notably about their Sorbian population. Moreover, when they do, as we discovered during field visits to, for example, the aforementioned Wolkenberg/Klěšnik, Sorbian culture is mostly historicised as something that ‘vanished’ following the onset of lignite mining.

To change this perception, we aimed to incorporate knowledge about the continuities, ruptures, and interweavings of industrial and Sorbian history into the heritage narrative, thereby diversifying the perspective on the landscape. For example, we used terminology such as ‘ongoing learning process’ within the application text to describe the processuality of the inclusion of minority and population rights within the resettlement process. In this way, we sought to clarify that the more socially acceptable resettlement processes currently being implemented continue to be criticised and debated. Another possibility at this textual level is to

use Sorbian languages in the official heritage-making process, for example, in the application text. In all documents and related publications, the German and Sorbian place names of all the places and regional authorities are used. In addition, the official five-page application was submitted not only in English, as is customary, but also in Upper and Lower Sorbian.

To visualise our findings on negotiation processes relating to minority rights within resettlement planning, we selected tangible signs of this ongoing learning process in the area under study. This applied especially to the settlement structures of resettled villages but also to preserved historical buildings or places of remembrance that combine the industrial and Sorbian aspects of their past.

The new village centre of Trebendorf/Trjebin constructed for Hinterberg/Zagora District, which was devastated in 2010, provides a good example of how a relatively minority-adjusted appropriation of a landscape can be achieved. Compared with other resettled villages where Sorbian traditions are maintained, traditions continued to be cultivated in this case, even after the resettlement process was complete, contributing to coexistence at the village and regional levels. From a planning perspective, this is apparent in the construction of the ‘Ludki’ kindergarten, the site for performing village festivals and traditions, and a sports field for club life. At the core is the ‘Schusterhof ensemble,’ comprising a timber frame house, a barn, and a bakery with a farm garden, which were relocated from Hinterberg/Zagora by Vattenfall and are now used by the local DOMOWINA group for public readings, theatre, and guided tours arranged for tourists. These showcase traditional farming methods and Sorbian traditions as well as the women’s club of Trebendorf/Trjebin (Figure 10.2).

The entire village centre therefore serves not only as a testimony to historical land use and living village cultures but also to effective integration of minority and population rights during the resettlement process. In addition to this ensemble-orientated approach, another factor influencing minority adjustment was the resettlement of Hinterberg/Zagora within its historically grown socio-cultural networks in the Schleife sub-region. This example demonstrates that documentation, transplantation to a new area, and the reconstruction of what has been destroyed there are not sufficient. Rather, the affected place and its inhabitants—whether or not they are Sorbs—are closely interwoven with the surrounding cultural landscape and can only respond with resilience to resettlement if these entanglements are considered within the resettlement process as part of their past, present, and future.

The above example also illustrates how Sorbs not only manage a historicised cultural heritage in the form of traditional costumes and customs but also actively shape the region. There are still tens of thousands of Lusatian inhabitants who self-identify as Sorbian and for whom Sorbian customs and culture are simply part of their everyday lives. This factor can be taken into account in the World Heritage application by extending the period analysed not only into the past but also into the present and future. Therefore, places that are currently being relocated, such as the last village of Mühlrose/Miłoraz and the associated new village centre, Neu-Mühlrose, can be included in the area under study.



*Figure 10.2* Sorbian tradition of picking potatoes at the ‘Schusterhof’ (shoemaker’s yard) in Trebendorf/Trjebin. Photograph by Angelika Balzke.

The rejection of the application in December 2023, however, hints at the limits of reconciling understandings of UNESCO heritage with the ever-changing character of the Lusatian energy landscape. Consequently, the aim of the initiative must be ‘to work with change rather than arrest or reserve it,’ as observed by DeSilvey and Harrison.<sup>38</sup> This applies to the negotiation of minority rights as well as other aspects, such as re-appropriating the landscape for renewable energy production. Further steps must weigh suitable opportunities for valorisation, which would enable the inclusion of more existing interpretations of the post-mining landscape into the overall narrative, for example, those of miners, resettled people, recultivation practitioners, environmental activists, artists, and others, especially as all of these positions could incorporate Sorbian perspectives and would often overlap with them.

Ultimately, this also means that future uses of the area must be considered when planning its heritagisation. This requires not only balancing economic interests and monument protection but also meaningful interpretation and consideration of Sorbian interests and culture within its legal framework<sup>39</sup> because places like Mühlrose/Miłoraz are located in the official Sorbian settlement area. Here, minority protection can potentially complement monument protection and nature conservation by combining different kinds of protection statuses for a prospective site. It is also apparent that the heritage development of Lusatian post-mining landscapes not only visualises a distant past but also a very tangible present that will have a lasting influence on the future of the local residents.

### **Participative Heritagisation: Discussion and Outlook**

In reflecting on the steps already taken, as elaborated above, we must address the question of whether inclusion of a minority-adjusted perspective in the general narrative amounts to a minority-adjusted heritage initiative. This necessitates reflecting on the initiative through the lens of participation: What does participation mean? Why is achieving it important, and how? Scholars and practitioners alike have been working on the concept of participation for some time now, sharpening its application as a multi-level model through its expansion from obtaining information to self-determination and considering the influence of decision makers as well as the actions of respective stakeholders.<sup>40</sup> This understanding fundamentally informs our work,<sup>41</sup> which is aimed at enriching the local official heritage discourse of the majority population and ultimately diversifying the region's self-understanding to open up more windows of opportunity for the integration of Sorbian interests. To gain access to this majority discourse, between March and October 2021, the SI team was involved in four meetings with district administrators and over 20 meetings with representatives of municipalities, where the aim was to present and discuss the tentative application. During this time, meetings were also held with the two councils for Sorbian affairs in Saxony and Brandenburg, respectively, and with representatives of the DOMOWINA regional associations in Lower Lusatia and Schleife/Slepo.

Clearly, as Di Giovine notes, a World Heritage scheme can only be 'an ethical project, aimed at instilling a sense of collective responsibility towards cultural diversity through governmentality'<sup>42</sup> if all relevant stakeholders are included in the respective negotiation processes. However, as discussed by Fredheim and May more recently, to motivate different stakeholders' participation, official heritage schemes are embedded within a narrative of endangerment, leading to a 'circle of heritage.' According to these authors, for something to be cared for, it has to be valued as endangered. Only if people care for it will they enjoy it, and if they enjoy it, they will want to understand it, and if they understand it, they will want to care for it.<sup>43</sup> This leads directly to the heart of the Lusatian initiative's most influential challenge. During our discussion with Sorbian stakeholders, it became clear that local communities are not concerned about losing visible signs of recultivation techniques. According to May, they do not necessarily need to be concerned, as the sense of ownership of communities participating in heritage schemes stems, first and foremost, from their enjoyment rather than from their awareness of endangerment.<sup>44</sup> However, it is the mining itself, not the post-mining landscape, that is associated with loss, especially for those affected by resettlement and/or those participating in local cultural practices. Members of the Brandenburg Sorbian Council, for example, emphasised the 'great loss of intact village communities combined with the decline of the Lower Sorbian language and culture' as a result of the devastation. Regarding the heritagisation process, they warned against neglecting the 'downfall of the Sorbian people' related to mining. At the same time, they associated the initiative with the hope of 'reaching a broader public and a new understanding among the inhabitants of Lusatia and beyond.'<sup>45</sup>

Adopting the minority perspective may be especially fruitful in freeing heritage from the discourse of endangerment.<sup>46</sup> First of all, Sorbian stakeholders who are consulted have an opportunity to criticise the valorisation of the post-mining landscape in general and, simultaneously, to include minority-adjusted and critical perspectives on the initiative. Nevertheless, as Susemihl concludes, minorities ‘must participate in the decision-making process, which involves more than consultation.’<sup>47</sup> In their respective work, both Susemihl and Nicholas have emphasised the importance of basing heritagisation of minoritised or Indigenous culture on participation that leads to what Brown calls ‘cultural resilience,’ entailing empowerment, capacity building, and community development through rootedness, resourcefulness, and resistance.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, Nicholas proposes six responses to achieve this goal: participation, self-determined decision-making and the flow of benefits, respect for intellectual property, research ethics and developing appropriate new research methods, conjoined policy development and implementation, and corporate responsibility.<sup>49</sup> While the Lusatian initiative does not address all of these recommendations, we elaborated strategies for promoting general participation, dealing with the specifics of autochthony, and marketing/touristic valorisation.<sup>50</sup> These three strategies bring together the legal framework for minority rights, as discussed above, with the updated UNESCO Operational Guidelines, which require the free, prior, and informed consent of local and/or Indigenous groups.<sup>51</sup> Germany also ratified the International Labour Organisation’s 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention in 2021 but did not acknowledge the status of Sorbs as Indigenous peoples, as they do not match the ILO’s definition of indigeneity, according to the state government.<sup>52</sup>

The ongoing public debate about the advantages and disadvantages of being recognised as Indigenous people calls for a careful adaptation of the concept of indigeneity in the Lusatian context.<sup>53</sup> The implementation of Sorbian interests within the World Heritage initiative is relatively independent of this distinction between ‘indigenous’ and ‘autochthonous.’ Both Indigenous people as well as ‘rightsholders [...] who have legal or customary rights [and] local communities [...] who possess a direct connection to the heritage place’<sup>54</sup> are defined as important stakeholders within the corresponding UNESCO guidelines. This definition automatically includes Sorbs and other local stakeholders equally.

Therefore, from a legal point of view, the question does not seem to be *whether* Sorbian aspects and interests should be integrated into the process, but rather *how* they should be integrated. Even though the tentative application was rejected at the end of 2022, the initiative remains ongoing, with efforts underway to seek new ways to transfer and increase knowledge about the post-mining landscape as well as new ways to valorise it. This creates opportunities for Sorbian stakeholders to diversify the landscape’s narrative and steer the flow of associated benefits back into the community.

However, this effort will only succeed if future steps to implement the initiative succeed in avoiding what can be termed the ‘participation paradigm.’ Fredheim warns that heritage schemes can reinforce neoliberal forms of governance if they focus solely on *how* to get people involved rather than on *if* people want to get

involved, and why.<sup>55</sup> The Lusatian case is also entangled in these logics. Whereas at the end of our discussions in 2021, the two councils for Sorbian affairs in Saxony and Brandenburg gave their free and informed consent to continue the initiative's work, the initiative is still—as we have stressed within our framework—a project of official academic and non-Sorbian political stakeholders. In the case of the Sorbian Institute and the BTU, the project, implemented by academic stakeholders, is aimed at getting local actors to care for the post-mining landscape.

A first step aimed at minimising the negative effects of this top-down dynamic could be to reinforce the transfer of project–intern knowledge. More important, however, would be the provision of resources for an equal exchange with all identified stakeholders as part of the future initiative's design and also to initiate engagement in financial, social, or cultural activities. Concrete steps to include not only a minority-adjusted perspective but also the actual minority, which extends beyond the current exchange with political stakeholders, are yet to be taken. Nevertheless, these steps are crucial to ensure that the initiative becomes a tool for shaping the current regional transformation process in the way that it intends to.

## **Conclusion**

As Harrison argues, 'all heritage needs to be seen as plural, as there are minorities in every society.'<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, integrating the perspectives and interests of minorities into heritagisation processes poses a challenge in many sites, as revealed by recent case studies. In the Lusatian case, this means first overcoming dichotomised understandings of 'Sorbian' and 'industrial culture' within the regional heritage discourse. Those understandings are tightly interwoven with the distinction drawn between tangible and intangible heritage within official heritage schemes. However, a minority-adjusted approach combines both aspects. Through knowledge of landscape-shaping cultural practices and knowledge about their spatial-material basis within the landscape, not only continuities and transformations but also the disappearance of Sorbian life worlds and the entwining of Sorbian and industrial culture can be integrated into the overall narrative and rendered visible within the post-mining landscape.

However, this leads to challenges stemming from the logic of official heritage rather than specifics relating to the minority. World Heritage schemes are always landscape planning processes in which the past is used to negotiate scenarios for the future. Even though the landscape-focused understanding within the UNESCO World Heritage Convention has been criticised by scholars, for example, Brumann et al.,<sup>57</sup> the rejection of the application has foregrounded the difficulties entailed in harmonising the idea of everlasting change—which is part of the OUV, given the nature of the industry that is active here—with understandings of tangibility within UNESCO. In our case, the rejection provides an opportunity to explore further valorisation formats. Could a holistic heritage approach, which works at the different existing levels of regional development, such as tourism, language revitalisation, and municipal politics, be equally useful without the UNESCO label?

In any case, questions relating to participation are at the centre of our future works. Due to their historically evolved minoritised status, autochthonous or Indigenous groups often lack the capacities and competences needed to shape heritage processes in a self-effective way. These include knowledge about planning routines and/or process logics. While capacity building is an important goal emphasised in existing case studies, non-minoritised initiators are just as responsible for creating a minority-adjusted process. Here, elaborating standards, such as the new UNESCO guidelines, and adapting them for local specifics is needed. These should, to return to Nicholas' work, include ethics and research methods for laying out the basis of the scheme as well as developing and implementing effective policies to ensure a flow of benefits towards minoritised stakeholders.<sup>58</sup> The initiative could then be used as an opportunity for the Sorbs themselves to develop collective strategies for the (re)appropriation of the post-mining landscape, not only via consumptive forms of land use, such as tourism and public education, but also through productive forms of land use in the fields of agriculture, forestry, and renewable energies.

Given that renewable energies are increasingly part of a re-appropriation strategy that shapes the post-mining landscape of Lusatia, those forms should be included in its future heritagisation,<sup>59</sup> particularly for raising awareness of associated problems. In the context of the lignite phase-out, the parent company of Lusatia's mining company, Energetický a průmyslový holding a.s. (EPH), is currently being restructured towards the use of renewable energy, raising the general question of how socio-cultural and minority aspects are and should be included in the region's transformation process. Here, the initiative should be seen as part of broader attempts towards minority-adjusted regional planning.

However, strengthening the 'Sorbianness' of the landscape will not undermine other perspectives, such as those of recultivation technicians or mining workers. As we elaborated, Sorbianness is a cross-cutting theme connecting all the disparate aspects of the post-mining landscape in Lusatia. Future concrete valorisation strategies will benefit from a minority-adjusted approach, leading, for example, to more sustainable tourism.<sup>60</sup> In this case, the heritage initiative could serve as a tool for shaping the current transformation process of the region, regardless of its success in the context of UNESCO World Heritage.

## Notes

- 1 Given differences in Sorbian and German names, we will use both names when referring to places within the Sorbian settlement area throughout the text.
- 2 Hagemann, "Industrie – Kultur – Erbe."
- 3 Muka, *Statistik der Lausitzer Sorben*.
- 4 The first part of the project was implemented by three partners: the Institute for Heritage Management (IHM) Cottbus, the Brandenburg University of Technology (BTU), and the Sorbian Institute/Serbski Institut (SI) between July 2020 and December 2021. Additional partners participating in the second part of the project, which will be completed by

- February 2025, are the Tourismusverband Lausitzer Seenland (TVLS) and the Institut für Neue Industriekultur (INIK).
- 5 [www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2023/2023\\_12\\_04\\_Abschlussbericht\\_Fachbeirat\\_Tentativliste.pdf](http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2023/2023_12_04_Abschlussbericht_Fachbeirat_Tentativliste.pdf)
  - 6 Susemihl, *Claiming Back Their Heritage*, 331–416.
  - 7 Macdonald, *Memorylands*, 16.
  - 8 Susemihl, *Claiming Back Their Heritage*, 43.
  - 9 Matern et al., “Strategies for Energy Transition.”
  - 10 Structural Strengthening Act for Coal Regions (“Strukturstärkungsgesetz”), August 8, 2020. See also: <https://medienservice.sachsen.de/medien/news/1048202>.
  - 11 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Paasi, “The Region, Identity, and Power.”
  - 12 Blaschke, *Geschichte Sachsens im Mittelalter*; Schrage, “Entstehung und Entwicklung der Markgrafschaft Niederlausitz.”
  - 13 See: Jatzwauk, *Die Bevölkerungs- und Vermögensverhältnisse der Stadt Bautzen*.
  - 14 Pech, *Ein Staat – eine Sprache?*, 26.
  - 15 Förster, *Um Lausitzer Braunkohle*.
  - 16 For a detailed study on NS-autarky policy and its implications for the lignite sector see: Baumert, *Autarkiepolitik in der Braunkohlenindustrie*.
  - 17 While mining can be viewed as one of the factors influencing the assimilation of the Sorbian languages and self-understandings, further developments during the first half of the twentieth century have to be taken into account. At the broader socio-cultural and political levels, the later National Socialist period, in particular, was marked by increasing discrimination against Sorbian institutions and self-understandings. See: Förster, “Die Nationalsozialistische Wendenzählung von 1939.”
  - 18 Elle, *Sprachenpolitik in der Lausitz*; Bednarek et al., “Die Oberlausitz,” 231.
  - 19 Wolle, “Energie für die Zukunft.”
  - 20 Muka, *Statistik Lausitzer Sorben*, attached map.
  - 21 Steinhuber, “Einhundert Jahre bergbauliche Rekultivierung,” 275.
  - 22 Baumert, *Autarkiepolitik in der Braunkohlenindustrie*, 294.
  - 23 Förster, *Verschwundene Dörfer*, 20.
  - 24 Berkner and Gesprächskreis Braunkohlenplanung, *Braunkohlenplanung und Umsiedlungsproblematik*.
  - 25 Elle, *Die Europäische Charta*.
  - 26 Berger et al., *Engpass Arbeit?!*, 13.
  - 27 Nicholas, “Protecting Indigenous Heritage Objects.”
  - 28 Faber-Schmidt et al., *Kulturplan Lausitz*; Laschewski et al., *Inwertsetzung des immateriellen Kulturerbes*.
  - 29 Nicholas, “Protecting Indigenous Heritage Objects,” 408.
  - 30 Ky Nam Nguyen and Quang Anh Phan, “The Management of Minority Heritage,” 746.
  - 31 Ky Nam Nguyen and Quang Anh Phan, “The Management of Minority Heritage,” 747.
  - 32 Groschwitz, “Kulturerbe vermitteln.”
  - 33 “Tentativantrag ‘Lausitzer Tagebaufolgelandschaft,’” Annex 2a.
  - 34 Lähdesmäki, “Politics of Tangibility.”
  - 35 Passey and Burns, “The Contested Shift,” 1,000.
  - 36 György, “An Attempt.”
  - 37 Kittan, “Aus der Dorfgeschichte,” 10.
  - 38 DeSilvey and Harrison, “Anticipating Loss,” 4.
  - 39 “Sächsisches Sorbengesetz” (Saxonian Sorbs Act) section 3 and “Brandenburgisches Sorben/Wendengesetz” (Brandenburg Sorbs/Wends Act) section 3.

- 40 For a discussion of the context of Lusatian transformation processes see: Schwan et al., *Kommunale Bürgerbeteiligung*; Lüttringhaus, “Eine Schwalbe.”
- 41 Preliminary thoughts on the adaptation of the concept have been compiled by Tschernokoshewa et al., *Einheit in Verschiedenheit*.
- 42 Di Giovine, “The Ethics of Participation,” 103.
- 43 Fredheim, “Endangerment-Driven Heritage Volunteering”; May, “Heritage, Endangerment and Participation.”
- 44 May, “Heritage, Endangerment and Participation,” 82.
- 45 Schwelina, *Projekt Lausitzer Tagebaufolgelandschaften*.
- 46 Fredheim, “Endangerment-Driven Heritage Volunteering,” 5.
- 47 Susemihl, *Claiming Back Their Heritage*, 427.
- 48 Susemihl, *Claiming Back Their Heritage*, 135; Nicholas, “Protecting Indigenous Heritage Objects,” 406–412; Brown, *Resilience, Development and Global Change*.
- 49 Nicholas, “Protecting Indigenous Heritage Objects,” 406.
- 50 We especially thank our colleague, Hannah Wellpott, the main author of these strategies, for sharing her work with us.
- 51 United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, “Operational Guidelines.”
- 52 Deutscher Bundestag (Wissenschaftliche Dienste), “Mögliche Folgen für Deutschland.”
- 53 Piñosová, “Das Konzept der Indigenität.”
- 54 UNESCO et al., “Guidance and Toolkit,” 30.
- 55 Fredheim, “Endangerment-Driven Heritage Volunteering,” 624.
- 56 Harrison, “Multicultural and Minority Heritage,” 197.
- 57 Brumann and Gfeller. “Cultural Landscapes.”
- 58 Nicholas, “Protecting Indigenous Heritage Objects.”
- 59 For example, there are currently no standards or methods for conserving wind mills. However, the official heritage discourse is slowly shifting towards valorising visible signs of renewable energies as important sites for understanding how humankind is dealing with the challenges of climate change. See: Bockelmann, “Zeit, dass sich was dreht.”
- 60 Global Sustainable Tourism Council, “GSTC Destination Criteria.”

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