



LATVIAN SUITI CULTURAL SPACE INCLUDED IN THE UNESCO INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE LIST

The UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage decided on Thursday to include Latvia's Suiti cultural space in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, the head of the Latvian ethnic cultural centre Suiti, Grigorijs Rozentāls, told BNS.

In its decision, UNESCO recommends Latvia and the Suiti community to identify several strategically important safeguarding measures and expects that these focused activities will strengthen the Suiti cultural heritage and identity. The committee also supports the proposed safeguarding measures which have been drawn with respect to the Suiti community's wish to maintain control over their future and decide on their destiny within the framework of the community, thus additionally strengthening the Suiti social and cultural identity.

The committee has taken into consideration that Suiti and their cultural space also represents many other European communities and their intangible cultural heritage, and that the inclusion of the Suiti in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding will draw the world's attention to the necessity to safeguard other European cultural heritage which is similarly endangered.

The criteria for establishing the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding were adopted in June 2008, and the newly included applications are the first ones in this list.

The Suiti cultural space is a unique phenomenon in Latvian culture. The Suiti are a small Catholic community in the Protestant (Lutheran) western part of Latvia. The Suiti cultural space is characterized by a number of distinct features, including vocal drone singing performed by Suiti women, wedding traditions, colorful traditional costumes, the Suiti language, local cuisine, religious traditions, celebrations of seasonal traditions, and a remarkable number of folksongs, dances and melodies recorded in this community.

Older forms of extended family structures are still common here, and such families, where the transfer of skills from generation to generation takes place, are important bastions of Suiti cultural heritage. The synthesis of pre-Christian traditions and religious rituals has created a unique blend of intangible cultural heritage in the Suiti community.

The pillar of Suiti identity - the Catholic Church - successfully recovered following the Soviet period and as a result, the Suiti cultural space has experienced a gradual renaissance. However, today only a few, mostly old people, have a good knowledge of the Suiti cultural heritage, and thus there is an urgent need to disseminate this knowledge and to involve more people in its preservation by recovering elements preserved only in written documents, film archives and museum depositaries.

Currently only about 2,000 people of Suiti origin live in the historic Suiti territory, with almost two thirds of them in the Alsunga municipality. Thanks to the activities of the ethnic cultural center Suiti, established in 2001, various projects have been carried out in the area - a weaving workshop has been set up in Alsunga, children are being taught to play kokle, a Latvian traditional string instrument, two international drone singing festivals have been organized etc. The Suiti center works closely with the only remaining Suiti municipality in Latvia - Alsunga.

The Suiti center is certain that the Suiti cultural space will do honour to Latvia's name in the world along with the country's Song and Dance Celebration. Being included in the UNESCO safeguarding list will help the Suiti overcome the damage left by the Soviet policies in the past.

The centre also believes that the new status will help return to life those Suiti cultural elements which have vanished from the daily lives but could be easily restored from written sources.

"We want to make sure that the next Suiti generations will preserve their identity, their sense of belonging to the Suiti area, that they will inherit our values, our lifestyle, our mentality and our nature," Rozentals said.

Latvia had prepared an application for the inclusion of Suiti cultural space in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. Rozentals told BNS earlier that the application would be reviewed by UNESCO experts from the UK as well as NGO representatives from Norway, who would analyze the application and the significance of the Suiti cultural space.

The total costs for preparing the application amounted to 20,000 lats (EUR 28,460) and it was funded by the Latvian State Cultural Capital Foundation and the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

Along with the Suiti cultural space, another 11 elements have been inscribed in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, including three elements from China, three from Mongolia and one from Belarus, France, Kenya, Mali and Viet Nam.

Since 2003, the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian nationwide song festival tradition has been included in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage lists.

THE LATVIAN INSTITUTE

The Latvian Institute (Latvijas institūts) was established by the Latvian state to provide a wide range of information about Latvia, its society, culture and history.

Contacts:

Elizabetes 57 (6th floor)

Rīga, LV – 1050, LATVIA

Phone: (+371) 67503663

Fax: (+371) 67503669

E-mail: info@li.lv

www: www.li.lv

Twitter: www.twitter.com/LatviaInstitute