

MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS: MEDIA ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DECENTRALIZATION IN BULGARIA

Abstract: The article seeks to test the public support for decentralization of cultural heritage management in Bulgaria. Based on the notion that most of the broader public opinion is modelled after the mass media rather than solely on the ideas presented by politicians, experts, professional organizations and academicians, a brief media analysis is conducted. The proposed conclusion argues that most of the media criticism is not tackling the issue of decentralization itself but rather the pure effectiveness in terms of protection and public expenditure.

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At first, media analysis is to be adopted as the public is mostly forming its stance on issues through mass media rather than stances of professional associations, highly-specialized positions of non-governmental organizations or stances of individual academics and practitioners. As decentralization is envisioned by the leading paradigm set by the Faro Convention to be mostly established through bottom-up approach, close to the public and thus establishing the willingness of the consumers, visitors, communities would be of utmost importance to estimate the proper functioning of such system. Such point of analysis would line with the interpretation of the Faro convention of Sani about the broadening of the meaning of heritage community, including business, non-governmental organizations and well as common citizens beyond the social and territorial boundaries (Sani, 2015).

The period taken for the media analysis would be 2018-2020 and would cover the related publications in the Bulgarian newspapers “Investor.bg”, “Standart” and “Sega”. The analysis would not speculate on political affiliations and/or neutrality of the newspapers. Such an approach would line with the notion of Holler and Mazza that given most of the issues on cultural heritage policy are quite recent, there is not yet a clear left-right divide established (Holler & Mazza, 2013).

At first, two articles were found in the archive of Standart covering cultural heritage policy in Bulgaria in the period 2018-2020. One is the publication of a private foundation running respectively private museum of a Bulgarian businessman and the other is a report on the heritage at risk at municipal level. Some minor reports on cultural heritage were found but they were informing about projects in the sphere, events or news regarding other countries.

The newspaper published the position of the “Trakiya” foundation, a non-governmental organization running the personal museum of the arrested businessman Vasil Bozhkov in regards to the confiscation of his private collection. The collection of mostly Thracian cultural heritage objects is considered as one of the biggest and most valuable in the world. The position states that the confiscation is illegal, that it was conducted with total disregard of any rules in relation to safety of the delicate and fragile objects. Further, the foundation argues that the action of the executive would put a major reputation problem for Bulgaria as currently the foundation is working with the German Archaeological Institute and the J. Paul Getty museum. The foundation also states that they have contacted various non-governmental organizations and research institutes working with cultural heritage in order to alarm about the so-perceived legal violations on behalf of the Bulgarian government (Rachev, 2020). The position was not put to analysis or some form of critique by the newspaper Standart.

The second article reports that the Sofia sub-municipal region of “Vazrazhdane” is cooperating with its Parisian counterpart of Marais and it has adopted the model of the latter in dealing with historical buildings. The Sofian region is investing money in developing building plans for restoration of historical privately-held property. Further examples are given about the city of Ruse where local entrepreneurs are buying and restoring cultural heritage buildings and that cultural heritage buildings are falling apart due to inactivity of their owners regarding restoration or reconstruction. When giving an example about the city of Varna, the article reports that under the current law in force, if the owner does not step up, the municipality could restore the building on its own and then mortgage the building to cover its expenses (Стандарт. [Standart], 2019). The article fails to answer why local municipalities are not using the established legal ability to restore such buildings and then mortgage them in order to cover their expenses. Further, it does not challenge the idea that municipalities are paying to private owners to fix their own property.

Secondly, two articles were found in the archive of the newspaper Sega for the period 2018-2020 covering the issues of cultural heritage policy in Bulgaria. A third article found was addressing the fight against counterfeiting of cultural heritage artefacts, but was omitted from the analysis, as it was not addressing the issues of decentralization. The analyzed articles were a re-published text of Radio Free Europe regarding a local municipality plan to restore a historical center of a small town and the other was an interview with a heritage expert in regard to the destruction of historical building complex called the Tzar`'s Stalls or Tzarski koniushni.

The interview presented is conducted with an architect with background in cultural heritage - Dafina Barfonchovska. She criticizes the Minister of Culture for his position regarding the fire which destroyed the building complex. She disagrees with his statement that he would have tried to give a status of protected building before the incident but given that the owner might have tried to appeal the court, he has not tried to protect it. However, she states that the possibility of appeal could not be a reason for him not taking the steps he is legally obliged to take and provide such a status. She argues also that the municipality of Sofia has referred to him a status candidacy three years ago, but he has not acted upon it. She further states that the claim of the executive on national and local level that it does not know who the owner of the building complex is, should not be treated as normal. The architect additionally challenges the shift of the Inspectorate on Cultural Heritage from enacting decisions of the National Institute on Immovable Cultural Heritage to sanctioning their legality and practicality, creating an institutional infighting. The Institute, by her words, has been challenged by the decrease of personnel, pay and that the shift towards local municipalities deciding on cultural heritage, where most of the cultural heritage is situated, has diminished its functions. She further states that the Ministry plans to inventorize the built heritage up until the current year have failed and the new

announcement that the Institute initiates procurement procedures on only listing world and national heritage would put the most-endangered local heritage to further more predatory private interests. At the end, the architect states that her biggest concern is that the state does not have a clear vision and strategy on cultural heritage (Valkov, 2018).

In the second article, citing a text from Radio Free Europe, Sega reports the plan of the Ahtopol municipality to renew its town central pedestrian space, a process in which the municipality is granting part of its property to a private owner. Upon commencement of the project, the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage sends a notice to the local administration that given that the town center is a protected historical area, the project could not be conducted. Even though the plan is stopped, the municipality continues with the plan to award the private person part of the municipal property (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2019). Even though the text is not criticizing or analyzing a policy, it somehow presents that the central national authority is controlling the local one in regards to cultural heritage.

At last, the media Investor.bg will be analyzed based on two articles on cultural heritage policy for the period 2018-2020. One of the articles is presenting the audit of the Bulgarian Court of Auditors conducted to check how sound the protection of immovable cultural heritage is and the other article is reporting on a decision of the Bulgarian council of Ministers in regard to structural changes in the National Institute of Immovable Cultural Heritage and its increased financing.

The statement of the Bulgarian Court of Auditors argues that 93% of the immovable cultural heritage objects are not taken care of by the Ministry of Culture based on their audit named “Protection and preservation of architectural objects of cultural heritage in urban areas” [„Опазване и поддържане на обекти на архитектурното наследство в градска среда“] covering the period 01.01.2015-30.06.2018. The audit was initiated after numerous publications and signals about non-action in regard to endangered built heritage. At the beginning, the court of auditors points out that there is not a functioning strategy on the protection of cultural heritage in Bulgaria. Further, they state that only one-fourth of all immovable cultural heritage is studied, listed and provided a protective status. The Ministry of Culture and the National Institute on Immovable Cultural Heritage are underfunded and of a dire need of experts, as one expert of the Institute should check roughly 3000 objects. Additionally, the budget of the Ministry for protection of such sites covers only 14% of the needed funding. The digitalized listing of cultural heritage, as it has been requested by a law from 2016, has not been acted upon with the same inaction applying to the creation of regional inspectorates on cultural heritage. The Court of Auditors has sent 15 recommendations to the Minister of Culture and 6 to the director of the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage on how to better the activities on cultural heritage preservation. They were advised on making mandatory checks on the effect on cultural heritage by infrastructure and real estate projects (Stoyanova, Сметната палата: Архитектурното културно-историческо наследство е в опасност. [The court of Auditors: the architectural cultural heritage is at risk], 2019).

The second article of Investor.bg reports that the Bulgarian Council of Ministers is financing the National Institute on Immovable Cultural Heritage with additional 150 000 BGN for personnel, given that the Institute has more functions since the legal changes of 2016. Further, the article states that the Council is also conducting administrative changes in the structure of the institute, creating two internal directorates and providing the expert working there the status of privileged state officials (Stoyanova, МС одобри повече пари за Националния институт за недвижимо културно наследство. [Ministerial council approved more money for the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage], 2020). Both articles of Investor.bg have not provided critique or analysis on the topics, but they were rather neutrally reporting news.

Conclusion

Based on the media outlets reviewed, it could be concluded that the decentralization as an issue in the Bulgarian system of cultural heritage management is not directly regarded. The articles of Standart and Investor.bg were either not providing critique or purely reporting the news, whereas those of the newspaper Sega presented issues of mismanagement on both local and national level rather than a critique on the decentralization attempts of the cultural policy authorities. Thus a sound conclusion on the stance of the general public on decentralization could not be made. Additional analysis on the topic should be made, incorporating more media coverage as the article is mostly suggesting a method rather than defending the results provided.

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