



## ILLICIT TRADE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN BULGARIA

**Abstract:** The objective of the article is to map the institutional and practical issues of the illicit trade of cultural heritage in Bulgaria. Due to the lack of sufficient prior academic research in that field, multidisciplinary approach, including media analysis is adopted and applied. Thus, limited and rather initial conclusions could be drawn and presented, namely that there are various institutional loopholes allowing the spread of such practices and that the illicit trade of heritage in Bulgaria is growing and being widely internationalized. The results call for further academic research.

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## Introduction

The system of cultural heritage management and governance in Bulgaria was marked by the drastic change from a very centralized system with high-profile, political and propaganda goals to one being left aside due to political and socio-economic changes in the cultural life of the country and chronically malfunded (Koleva, 2014, p. 66). The country became widely known for its spreading and systemic political and institutional corruption in the period after the fall of the Communist regime to the present, a fact that led to the conditional accession of the country to the European Union and being under strict monitoring from the European Commission in terms of judicial system and practice. The combination of those factors undoubtedly left the sector of cultural heritage exposed to corruption, illicit trade and money laundering. Bulgaria became the third largest source of illicit trade in Europe, deploying 30.000 antiques looters without counting the other participants in the whole network of illegal excavations, illicit trade, smuggling across borders, etc. ((Moore, 2007) as cited by (Campbell, 2013, pp. 123, 125)).

Notwithstanding such developments in Bulgaria, the issue of illicit trade of artefacts is not sufficiently academically reviewed. An initial attempt in that direction would be the mapping of the situation before further analysis. Thus, the main purpose of the article is to seek the establishment of the main tendencies and models of those illegal activities in Bulgaria providing grounds for further research. Media analysis would be employed as well, given that the current research on the connection between smuggling, illicit trade, money laundering and the Bulgarian cultural heritage is rather limited. The mapping would stress on two moments: which are the conditions that allow for the wide-spread malpractices and which are their main traits and trends. As the article does not seek to be exhaustive, but rather introductory, the ending conclusions should be regarded as opening to further research.

### **Institutional loopholes**

At first, the legal and institutional loopholes should be considered and reviewed. The Bulgarian laws and archaeological practice allow for an indiscriminate involvement of non-specialists in the excavations, including mass involvement even from school children (Gaydarska, 2010). Such uncontrolled access to finds provides for a major risk for treasure hunting during field search. In addition, the state inventory of finds and artefacts has major issues with its proper functioning, it is mal-funded, it is operated by a lot of different institutions, rather than being centralized, it is still not completely digitalized and unified in its classification criteria (Vasileva & Petrova, 2019, pp. 34-39). Further, the implementation of the rule that every private collection should be registered with the entirety of its artefacts was postponed numerous times for years (Compedium. Cultural policies and trends, 2020) (haskovo.net, 2010), themselves being allowed and made legal since 1969 (Банкеръ[Bankera], 2008). The trading of finds and artefacts which are not registered with the Bulgarian authorities is not allowed, but that does not constitute a crime (HEREIN, 2015).

Another institutional problem for heritage in Bulgaria is the financial mismanagement. In comparison to another country in the region of Central and Eastern Europe – Poland, which is substantially less financially involved in the management of museums (EGMUS, 2020), Bulgaria experiences less cultural participation in regards to museums (Eurostat, 2020, p. 127) with higher ticket prices in regards to entrance (Compedium. Cultural policies and trends, 2020). Additional factor in that respect is that Bulgaria enjoys a greater deal of museum visits from foreigners due to its tourism industry than Poland.

### **Mapping of the main practices and trends**

The gravity of situation with illicit trade through cultural heritage in Bulgaria is presented by the fact that experts' survey points it as the 5<sup>th</sup> most likely European country of origin of illicitly traded artefacts after Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Romania (European Commission, 2019, p. 104). The illicit trade is considered to be loomed by the opening of the borders following the political changes in Bulgaria and the Balkans, together with the growing traffic through the Turkish-Bulgarian border, estimated to be the second busiest in the world and the deployment of the internet as a trading tool (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017, pp. 44-46). A Bulgarian state prosecutor estimates that the value of the illicit trade amounts to that of the drug trade revenues in the internal Bulgarian market and follow the routes of the international drug trade (news.bg, 2010).

The growth of the legal trade in artefacts could be considered a positive outcome, as that may mean that the sector is turning to be more institutionalized. The share of the cultural and natural heritage goods in imports for Bulgaria rose from 0.04% in 2011 to 0.86% in 2015 and that of exports from 0.07 in 2011 to 0.41 in 2016 (UNESCO, 2020). Additionally, there are accounts of increase in the crime-fighting activities on behalf of the Bulgarian authorities. Just the recovered number of artefacts from criminals for the first 9 months of 2011 was 25000 (Ministry of Interior, Bulgaria, 2011). For the whole of 2018, the objects recovered were 36000, with Romania seizing back 6043, the German state of Bavaria 7000 for 2017 and Latvia 982 in 2017 (European Commission, 2019, pp. 86,87).

Bulgaria has a special police unit, the National Police's Cultural Property Department, with as much employees as the respective unit in Spain and twice as much as Sweden (European Commission, 2019, pp. 132, 133), however, one of its first heads, Georgi Gotev, was involved in an artefacts smuggling ring together with state prosecutors and museums (Shentov, 2010 as cited by (Campbell, 2013, p. 123)). Further, the Commission on culture at the Bulgarian parliament employed as a consultant a well-known smuggler of cultural artefacts, raising uproar amongst the professionals in the sphere of heritage (Банкеръ[Bankera], 2008). That poses the question of the political and institutional corruption playing substantial role in the illicit trade of artefacts in Bulgaria. Additional fact in that

direction is that the closing of the pre-accession chapter “Customs” was slowed down mainly due to the lagging of the synchronization with the European Union law from the side of Bulgaria in regards to the regime of moving of cultural heritage when it comes to cultural heritage within the European Union (Arhea Association [Асоциация Археа], 2003, p. 21). The wide-spread corruption amongst the border guard and customs officials suggest another institutional problem for containing illicit trade in heritage in Bulgaria (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017, pp. 44-46).

### Conclusion

Limited conclusions on the institutional and legal loopholes, the main tendencies and models of illicit trade of cultural heritage in Bulgaria could be made by the article. The underdeveloped inventory list of archaeological finds and artefacts, the unrestricted access and involvement of non-professionals in the archaeological field research and the uncontrolled private collections are pressing issues for the proper containment of the illicit trade of artefacts. Bulgaria presents itself as one of the largest European exporters of such illegal goods following the routes established with drug trading and eased by the strategic geographic location of the country. Political and institutional corruption evidently play a substantial role in the illicit trade of artefacts as well, reaching as far as high-level officials and politicians.

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