

Protection and Promotion of Immovable Cultural Heritage of Local Importance in the Municipalities of Sandanski, Balchik, Kavarna and Garmen

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Abstract: *In the process of decentralisation of cultural heritage management in Bulgaria, it is a challenge for local authorities to develop and implement effective local policies for the protection and promotion of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance. To what extent do the municipalities manage to cope in the changed environment, what issues do they face, and what are the characteristics of the context in the municipalities – these are some of the questions that are analysed, based on focus group discussions, conducted within the ethnological study in the period May-June 2022 in four municipalities in Bulgaria – Sandanski, Balchik, Kavarna, and Garmen.*

Keywords: immovable cultural heritage, local actors, local management, Bulgaria.

Ключови думи: недвижимо културно наследство, местни актьори, управление на местно ниво, България.



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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, with the changes taking place in Bulgaria and the decentralisation processes that are slowly being established with the new democratic political and economic system, the protection of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance is gradually being entrusted to the municipalities. Within the broader legal framework of cultural policy and management, decentralisation is enshrined as a principle in the *Law on the Protection and Development of Culture*¹ from 1999. In the following years, the harmonisation of Bulgarian legislation with the European one has given rise to a wide-ranging discussion related to state policy and cultural governance. Analysing the state policy on cultural and historical heritage in Bulgaria, St. Denchev and S. Vassileva identify as key problems in the field of cultural heritage the following: 'limited state capacity for financing and control; insufficient

¹ *Law on protection and development of culture 1999.*

incentives for the absorption of new sources of funding; imperfect legislation in the field of conservation; highly centralised management system; insufficient use of cultural heritage as a resource for development, etc.² Thus, in the process of European integration and the following years of reforms, the search for the best options for the development of a cultural heritage management policy in Bulgaria continues, the first step being the creation of new legislation.

The current *Cultural Heritage Act* is adopted in 2009³. Concerning the policies for the protection and promotion of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance, which is the focus of this article, it is important to draw attention to Article 17 of the law. It stipulates that the mayors of the municipalities 'shall organise and coordinate the implementation of the policy for the protection of the cultural heritage on the territory of the respective municipality', and the following activities are specifically described in the law: '1. (supplemented, SG No. 52/2016) assist in carrying out activities for the search, study, preservation, and promotion of cultural values in accordance with their powers, as well as carry out other activities specified in this law; 2. establish a public council for the protection of cultural heritage as an advisory body to the municipality; 3. (new – SG No. 96 of 2017, in force from 02.01.2018) exercise the powers of a concessionaire in the award of concessions for immovable cultural heritage – municipal property'. The Municipal Councils are those that: '1. adopt a strategy for the protection of cultural heritage on the territory of the respective municipality in accordance with the national strategy referred to in Article 12, paragraph 2; 2. (amend. – SG 96/2017, in force from 02.01.2018) 3. establish a municipal fund 'Culture' under the conditions and according to the procedure of the Law on the Protection and Development of Culture; 4. adopt regulations on the structure and activities of municipal museums, in coordination with the Minister of Culture; 5. provide funding through earmarked

funds in the municipal budget for the activities under par. (3) (New – SG 52/2016, amend. – 21 of 2020, in force from 13.03.2020)'.

RESEARCH METHOD

To what extent did the municipalities cope with the delegated management of the cultural heritage sites of local importance, what challenges did they face, and to what extent did they develop their own model of work on the protection of cultural heritage on their territory or there is no such model, what are the specificities of the context in the municipalities, are some of the questions that were asked during the focus group discussions held in the period May-June 2022 in the four municipalities. Chronologically, they happened first in the town of Sandanski on 10 May 2022, then in the town of Balchik and the town of Kavarna – on 12 May and 13 May 2022, and in the village of Garmen on 3 June 2022. These are the municipal centres of the four municipalities studied within the project 'Policies for conservation and promotion of immovable cultural values of local importance in Bulgaria. Ethnological analysis on the examples of the municipalities of Balchik, Kavarna, Garmen and Sandanski'. The focus of the discussions was on how the immovable cultural heritage of local importance is integrated into the strategic documents of the municipalities, such as the Integrated Municipal Development Plan, for example. Other questions were whether the municipalities have Public Councils (advisory bodies) working towards the protection of cultural heritage; has the Municipal Council of the respective municipality adopted a Cultural Heritage Protection Strategy; what are the municipality's priorities regarding immovable cultural heritage; who, in their opinion, is best placed to look after the immovable cultural heritage of local importance; what is the most significant immovable cultural heritage in their municipality; are these sites included in existing cultural and tourists routes. The profile of participants in the discussions included deputy

² Denchev, Vassileva 2010: 367.

³ *Cultural Heritage Act* 2009.

mayors and experts from the municipalities, directors from the local history or archaeology museums, representatives from community centres (chitalishte), representatives from tourist information centres, journalists and local citizens.

GENERAL FINDINGS

The discussions showed that on a local governmental level, in the four municipalities, there was no prior information for some of the sites, their number and type⁴, thus the research itself increased the attention of the municipalities' experts about the listed immovable cultural heritage of local importance. An important initial remark is that in each of the municipalities, there are sites of immovable cultural heritage of national importance and the priority of preservation and popularisation is generally put there. This is also due to the fact that these objects are recognisable and attract tourists, which means that they bring in revenue, although not evaluated as significant. The four municipalities are also small in size and capacity⁵ and this is given as a reason why there are no appointed specialists to their teams on the subject of immovable cultural heritage, but it can be said that there are local specialists, namely the directors of archaeological and historical museums and their teams of experts, albeit small in number.

During the focus group discussions, local experts onsite showed, on the one hand, knowledge of the law, and, on the other hand, they themselves identified the need for the same mechanisms (council, strategy) as lacking, but also as those that would contribute to the better functioning of the work for the preservation and popularisation of the sites. The keywords in the discussions were: 'lack of coordination', 'need for more dialogue', 'lack of funding', 'other priorities on local level', 'doing what we can', 'commitment and search for solutions mostly

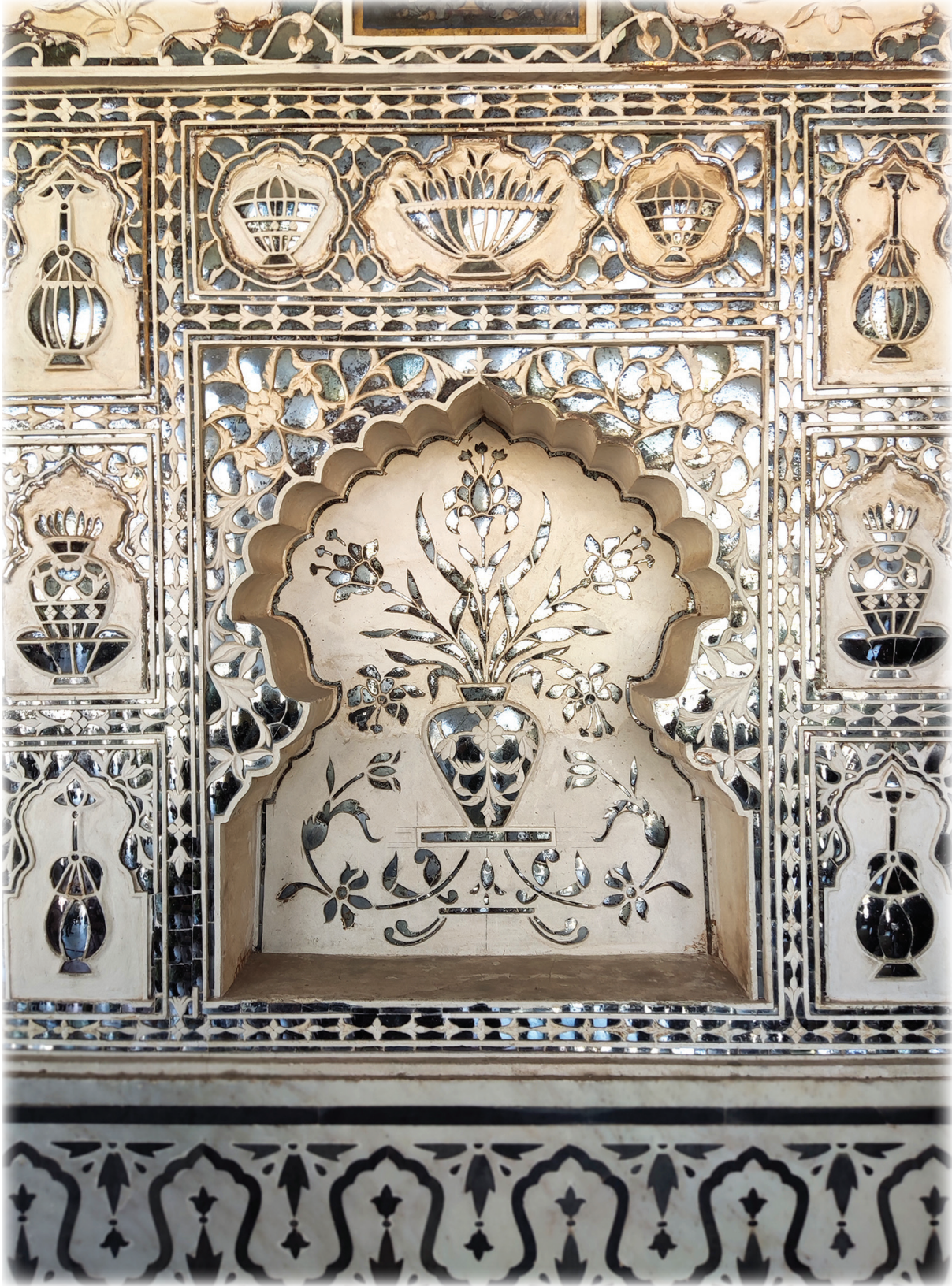
based on personal initiative', 'opportunities and search for synergies, both with the business and NGO sector', 'community centres as a resource', 'citizens themselves, who self-organise and in some cases contribute with donations and voluntary work for the preservation of certain monuments and the places around them'. In regard to budget, most of the money spent in the municipalities on cultural heritage tends to go towards festivals, events, promotional materials, and infrastructure maintenance, even when it comes to laying asphalt on a street that reaches a site.

Three general strengths could be synthesised and stand out: (1) Strong expert units in the local museums: History Museum, Balchik; History Museum, Kavarna; Archeological Museum, Sandanski; and the experts – animators in the Ancient Roman City 'Nikopolis ad Nestum', the village of Garmen. From the meetings held it can be concluded that the directors and local experts are erudite, competent and have a view on the conditions and real situation of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance, i.e. the expert factor, although limited in number and supported by a few resources, is present onsite. (2) In each of the studied municipalities, there are at least a few listed immovable cultural heritage of local importance that have the potential to be developed, and after further study, development and socialisation, to become cultural tourism sites and a source of development for the respective places; (3) The existence of Tourism Advisory Councils within the municipalities could be a starting point to increase the focus on the immovable cultural heritage of local importance.

The following key challenges and gaps were recognised in the discussions: There is a strong preponderance for the conservation and promotion of the immovable cultural heritage of national importance, which also indicates the

⁴The data was provided upon request to the research team by National Institute of Immovable Cultural Heritage. 64 sites on the territory of Sandanski Municipality; 17 sites on the territory of Balchik Municipality; 11 sites on the territory of Kavarna Municipality; 16 sites on the territory of Garmen Municipality.

⁵ More information about each of the municipalities could be found in the separate articles devoted to them.



rather pragmatic approach of the municipalities because these sites are an opportunity for fundraising in the form of tickets. All four municipalities have one significant site, which attracts attention to it and stands out in relation to the immovable cultural heritage of local importance: in the municipality of Sandanski, it is the Early Christian complex in the town of Sandanski; in the municipality of Garmen, the Ancient Roman City 'Nikopolis ad Nestum', in the village of Garmen; in the municipality of Kavarna, this is the Archaeological Reserve 'Kaliakra', in the municipality of Balchik, these are the Architectural Park Complex 'The Palace' next to the town of Balchik, and Akyazili Baba Tekke in the village of Obrochishte. For example, one of the participants of the focus group discussion in Kavarna explains why a site of national importance is more visited than one of local importance which is the local symbol of the town: 'Kaliakra is of the greatest tourist importance, in principle, not only because of its location, access is much easier, now the road has been recently repaired. My thought is that it is easy to access for a larger number of tourists, buses, it is used by tour operators very often as one of the points on their routes. So that is why it is more developed, more visited. But generally locally for the town, I think Chirakman is the undisputed favourite in my perception and again we go to the old problem, access, road, infrastructure, and getting on top are generally key issues that prevent it from being'.

Another challenge and current lack of local governance is that in all four municipalities, there are no Public Councils (advisory bodies) yet established by the mayors to discuss the issues of immovable cultural heritage and the formation of such would improve the coordination, cooperation, and quality of the protection and promotion of cultural heritage of local importance. Additionally, the Municipalities would improve and benefit if their Municipal Councils adopted strategies for the protection of the cultural heritage of each of them. Such strategies exist in other

municipalities, for example, the Municipality of Avren and the Municipality of Peshtera.

It is noteworthy that in the four municipalities, most of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance were legally declared in the 1960s and 1970s (as in all of Bulgaria), for which there is currently no up-to-date knowledge and financial resources for research and conservation. The *Local Taxes and Fees Act*⁶ from 1998 and the *Patronage Act*⁷ from 2005 offer opportunities to incentivise the owners of such values, but there are no examples to show that these are actually being put into action. Rather, there are volunteer campaigns among local residents to raise funds and care for locally important properties that citizens consider significant to the community. This shows that the local community identifies with this cultural heritage, and considers it important and part of the local cultural and historical memory and identity. Such examples were observed in the municipality of Garmen.

The participants in the focus group discussions also emphasised key risks regarding the protection and promotion of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance. In the first place, these are the bureaucracy and lengthy administrative procedures that affect the conservation of cultural heritage that is being destroyed, because, by the time an expert opinion is requested from the National Institute of Immoveable Cultural Heritage, the monument may have collapsed. Another issue is that, in the case of some archaeological sites that are difficult to locate in situ, the question arises as to what would be the best thing to do, especially if they are on private property and their value has already been removed and obliterated. In one of the focus group discussions, an important question was raised concerning the lack of a well-established 'culture of cultural tourism' or a so-called new generation of tourists who have no interest in acquiring new knowledge about the history of the particular place they visit. This applies to both domestic and foreign tourists, who, in many cases, spend their holidays in

⁶ *Local Taxes and Fees Act* 1998.

⁷ *Patronage Act* 2005.

closed resorts. The need to seek opportunities to turn these places into attractions also shifts their focus from places of memory, history, and identity to those of entertainment. In general, a change is observed in the type of tourist who is harder to get out of the “all-inclusive” complexes. In such cases, the role of the tour operators becomes even more important in attracting the interest, especially of the group tourists.

On the basis of the conducted four focus group discussions, the following characteristics of the municipalities’ ‘model’ of working on cultural heritage as a whole can be synthesised: (1) partial activities; (2) a supportive function; (3) working from project to project with no vision and strategy. All municipalities lack an overall vision and strategy for cultural heritage and in particular for the immovable cultural heritage of local importance. The example of the municipality of Garmen, where it was said ‘we only pay salaries’, in this case referring to the salaries of the animators who work at Nikopolis ad Nestum, while the other sites are left in the hands of donations and the voluntary work of local residents. ‘For the last two years, we have no budgeted funds in this area, excluding the salaries of the people we pay in this sector, but we have no budgeted expenses related to purely investment intentions in this sector’. Thus, to a large extent, everything that happens on the sites is actually entrusted to the responsibility and conscientious attitude of the specialists who work there. The project-based work and funding are the key ways of funding in the cultural heritage sphere, highlighting the cross-border cooperation projects that have carried out repair and improvement work in the municipalities, with some short-lasting results and effects.

However, in each of the municipalities, there are examples of sites of immovable cultural heritage of local importance that could serve as examples that are preserved and popularised

to a certain extent. In the case of Balchik municipality, this is the Akyazələ Baba Tekke⁸ in the village of Obrochishte that was renovated within a project. In Sandanski municipality, one such site is the Hadzhisimeonov barn⁹ in the village of Goleshevo which is maintained by a political party (VMRO, Bulgarian National Movement). In the Municipality of Garmen, this is St Archangel Church, in the village of Dubnitsa, restored with donations and voluntary work of the villagers. In the Municipality of Kavarna, this is Chirakman¹⁰, which for local experts and residents is the symbol of the town of Kavarna, which is in ongoing reconstruction and with interest to be restored by various business initiatives in the town.

CONCLUSION

It can be summarised that although recognised as an economic development resource¹¹ and potential tourist attraction, the sites of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance are not a priority for any of the four municipalities. There are no formally established community heritage protection councils as advisory bodies to the municipality as envisioned in the Cultural Heritage Act at the time of the discussions, and there are no developed Cultural Heritage Protection Strategies adopted at the municipal level. If to some extent the former happens informally in practice, due to the fact that in smaller towns people know each other, municipal experts and those from museums interact frequently on different cultural heritage topics, the lack of a strategy and vision for the protection and promotion of the immovable cultural heritage of local importance is already a problem. In 2020, in an analysis of the state of the legal infrastructure in the field of cultural heritage, Ivan Kabakov emphasises that: ‘Municipalities and municipal councils, as the bodies of the local authority that are closest to the problems of citizens and are called upon to meet their expectations to

⁸ Erolova 2023, 95.

⁹ Hristova 2023.

¹⁰ Popcheva 2023.

¹¹ Read more in: Vladimirov 2021, 9-15; Vladimirov 2023.

the maximum extent, are also entrusted with the responsibility to “organize and coordinate the implementation of the policy for the protection of cultural heritage’. However, the lack of financial resources that are being devoted to other urgent priorities prevents the municipalities from fully expanding the potential of those cultural heritage sites. It is also very important when working on the preservation and popularisation of cultural heritage sites to have in mind the socialization of the individuals to local history and culture

as explained by Zhelyu Vladimirov that “the well-socialised individuals openly identify with their belonging to certain society and culture – they praise the significant cultural events, places and symbols related to their identity. The not well-socialised individuals are those, who identify weaker (or not at all) with the dominant culture”¹². Thus, all policies and practices established on both local and national levels should be thought of in the interrelation between the sites and the people.¹³

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¹² *Kabakov* 2020: 102.

¹³ *Vladimirov* 2023: 169.

Защита и промоциране на недвижимото културно наследство от местно значение в общините Сандански, Балчик, Каварна и Гърмен

Ваня Иванова

В процеса на децентрализация на управлението на културното наследство в България местните власти са изправени пред предизвикателството да разработват и прилагат ефективни местни политики за опазване и популяризиране на недвижимите културни ценности от местно значение. Доколко общините успяват да се справят в променената среда, с какви проблеми се сблъскват, какви са характеристиките на контекста в общините – това са част от въпросите, които са анализирани въз основа на дискусии във фокус групи, проведени в рамките на етнологичното проучване в периода май-юни 2022 г. в четири общини в България – Сандански, Балчик, Каварна и Гърмен. Целта на статията е да се анализират събраните данни в сравнителна перспектива и да се очертае дискусията за недвижимите културни ценности с местно значение в четирите общини.

