

The Management of Cultural Heritage in Albania: Towards A European Model?

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Abstract

The administration of cultural heritage is the responsibility of central government institutions and their subordinate institutions. The Ministry of Culture is the main responsible institution for the administration of cultural resources which are mostly financed by the state budget. The protection and preservation of cultural heritage (restoration projects, conservation interventions, maintenance, research, archaeological excavation, rescue and preventive excavation, as well as promotion and education), are financed from the state budget through the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Sports.

The loss of cultural heritage values and national identity is a matter of high interest and cannot be dealt with only by one or two institutions. It comprises the interinstitutional engagement both nationally and internationally as well as the awareness raising of the public opinion on the individual and unique values of cultural heritage, parallel to the regional dimension of this heritage which is special and at the same time integral part of a large national and international family.

In conclusion, every institutional action aims at the integrated protection of the entirety of cultural heritage values as a testimony of national identity, preservation and its promotion in order to place it at the use of public and future generations. This paper aims at bringing to light the changes witnessed at the end of 2013, which entail a deep reform in the cultural heritage system and its management. The question which is brought to the discussion, rightly so: are we going towards a European model?

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage, protection, preservation, archaeology, management plan.

The Albanian legislation is composed as well as integrates the various policies of different sectors. The principle of sustainable development is at the basis of policies of different sectors such as economic development, urban planning, protection of cultural and natural heritage, as well as environment and tourism. Legal initiatives and major projects approved or planned to be implemented with the aim of improving (where necessary) the current legal grounds or the creation of space and new possibilities for the development and integration into the EU family, testify the concept of sustainable development in the process of policy making and decision making.

The enlargement of institutional participation attracting and bringing closer local governments in whose territory are positioned cultural resources, the awareness raising and sensitivity of local communities towards the influence and importance that heritage has for economic development and live in a sustainable environment, are some of the main policies of the Ministry of Culture (together with its many subordinate institutions), which has been and still is an active part of the consultancy and decision making process. Such system, can be improved further serving the better coordination of policymaking with expert groups in the field of cultural heritage with an institutional affiliation to the

national and local government institutions but also from the civil society and NGO's operating in the sector.

We have to underline in this context the fact that Albania is a country dotted with rich cultural heritage and an impressive history. Although its relatively small size, the country has over 2000 monuments waiting to be further explored by visitors. Cultural tourism has a strong impact on the local economies. Destinations which offer high quality cultural tourism in Albania such as Butrint (Unesco site), Gjirokastra (Unesco site), Berat (Unesco site), as well as Apollonia, Durrës, Lezha and Shkodra, have a lot to offer to visitors enabling them to better understand an unknown country. With the increase in the number of visitors by the year, more chances are being offered to cultural heritage to be preserved (the case of Butrint where archaeology complements nature, and the case of Gjirokastra, where the castle, the historic centre and traditional houses offer visitors immense cultural and historic values).

It is worth mentioning that a huge impact on the development and tourism promotion in Albania have served the latest interventions in the field of cultural heritage such as the reconstruction of two roads in Shkodra and their conversion to pedestrian roads, the rehabilitation and restoration of the facades of shops and houses, the reconstruction of houses in Gjirokastra (Unesco site), and many castles, museums and cultural heritage monuments throughout the country. Last but not least the creation of further pedestrian streets in Tirana, Kruja, Korça and lately in 2014 in Berat (Unesco site) are commendable actions.

Although we can be certain that until now there are no signs regarding the overuse of monuments and their possible damage by tourist flows, and the fact that the Butrint National Park management plan is currently under revision (unfortunately a process which has not advanced at high speed), indicates that this issue is an important part of the discussion. The mechanism of management plans is extended to the cases of Berat and Gjirokastra, as well as in the form of administration regulations of archaeological parks and historic centers. More needs to be done in order to further specify the managing elements of tourism flows which help in the protection of monuments from damage created as a result of high number of visitors.

The administration of cultural heritage is mainly the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture as mentioned earlier, which takes care of the monuments including the public expenditure deriving from the state budget.

The archaeological parks, an important asset of the country have a diversified dependency. In Butrint, Apollonia and Bylis the Coordination and Administration Offices are in charge of the day to day operations, while parks such as Shkodra, Lezha, Antigone-Melan-Adrianopol, Amantia, Orikum and Finiq are now under the aegis of regional directorates of national heritage.

It is important to be underlined that recently the financial operations of Butrint National Park (BNP) changed radically. With a Council of Ministers Decision of December 2012,

BNP was awarded the right to collect and administer 90% of the income created by tickets. This fiscal incentive though, which was implemented through the assistance of the Albanian American Development Fund (AADF) has not proved to bring the expected results, at least in the short term period.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Culture and its subordinate institutions are responsible for the administration of historic centers and archaeological areas for which as a result of the implementation of the Cultural Heritage Law of 2003 (amended in 2006 and 2008), have been drafted and approved with a Council of Ministers Decision the respective regulations for their administration, such as Shkodra, Korça, Tirana, Kruja, Saranda, Durrës, Elbasan, Lezha, Berat, Gjirokastra. The government remains the main investor through the state budget, approved on the basis of the medium-term budget drafting procedures in the financing and implementation of projects related to the restoration, conservation and maintenance of cultural heritage.

The reformation of the cultural heritage system may be considered “an achievement” for the year 2010, at least regarding the publicity of the pros and cons arguments regarding a possible change of the system. While the year 2011, apart from the handover of competences of Regional Directorates of National Culture from the Ministry of Culture to the Institute of Monuments, would also be a groundbreaking moment and great challenges with the proclamation of the revitalization concept of museum centers and cultural monuments. Through this initiative cultural heritage was aimed to serve as a special attraction for the visitors, as it was indeed requested and promoted by the Albanian government.

Few years down the road, in 2014, many changes took place, which on the one hand influenced a great lot in the saving of cultural heritage assets. The efficient system which was installed, through a better institutional reform, reflected in the budget scheme of that year, is nowadays a reality. The Ministry of Culture in late 2013, from a large and complicated public institution, covering tourism, youth and sports, turned into a smaller and more agile institutions dealing specifically with culture. It is worthy to mention that from 9 regional directorates of national culture now there are only 6, while the administration and coordination offices of archaeological parks are included as units within these directorates with fewer exceptions.

Theoretically this brings more efficiency because of the smaller number of managers but also finance people, but in my opinion more time is needed to judge if the system is working well. As every new scheme, time will prove if this was the right move towards the better management of cultural heritage resources in Albania.

The fact that the new cultural heritage law is still under preparation at the time this paper was prepared for presentation and publication, sheds many question as to whether many questions already raised over the years regarding the overall management will be possible to receive an answer in the short term.

Which are some of the reasons which pushed the than Ministry of Culture into undertaking a reform of the administration of cultural heritage assets? Which were the arguments and how were the various opinions presented publicly? What was the role of experts and some of their thoughts?

It is important to underline the fact that in the year 2010 the reform of the cultural heritage system was proposed, aiming at re-organizing its tangible heritage institutions, namely the Institute of Monuments of Culture, Archaeological Service Agency, Regional Directorates of National Culture, Archaeological Parks, National Center for the Inventorying of Cultural Goods and some archaeological and national museums. In this proposed reform the focus was on the balance between administration and working personnel, and its change would actually influence positively the wellbeing of monuments and their surroundings.

Our system of cultural heritage, starting from 2003, has embarked on its own distinctive profile, which coincides in general lines with the development and tendency of progress of countries comparable to us, those belonging to the European context including the Mediterranean area, as well as following the best experiences of UNESCO and other international organizations.

Public discussions and hearings (in relation to cultural heritage assets), aiming at involving in their conversation the various social groups is at its early stage of development. Positive illustrations can be considered the consultation practices of the municipalities of Tirana and Shkodra and their respective regulation plans but also the municipalities of Berat and Korça in similar circumstances.

Having in mind the great role that cultural heritage plays in the development of our society as well as the latest political inclinations, it is quite clear that in our regions and the wider Mediterranean area, the focus of each government is centered at the promotion of cultural heritage, but also on finding and strengthening the mechanisms for the better education and access to information of citizens.

In Albania, the management of cultural heritage resources has been turned into an action area, because, most importantly, it constitutes not only an essential factor in the consolidation of the country's identity and national profile, but also as a tool to promote the tourism industry which is growing at a fast rate.

Cultural heritage is perceived as a public asset. The financial support from government structures on cultural heritage monuments and sites is increasingly expanding and alongside the academic discussion is progressing. This undoubtedly is increasing awareness and better strengthen school curricula at various levels of education, regarding cultural heritage and its many values. Especially important to be mentioned is the crucial position of heritage in Albanian society. Nowadays, civil servants, the wider public and local actors are intertwined with each other when is acted on the cultural heritage area.

Cultural heritage is more and more perceived as a tool which greatly helps in local development. As a factor of human progress, cultural heritage is a tool which generates new opportunities for creative activities, historic and archaeological sites management and tourism, as well as an ever-growing synergy between there above mentioned factors. While taking into account the fact that cultural heritage = public asset, its management and use by people needs clear legal and administrative framework, a strict professional and ethical preparation harmonized with the regional countries in order that intercultural dialogue can get a further positive impetus.

The improvement of legislation remains a priority and objective of every government, but needs to be in the focus of all professionals, archaeologists or restorers, but also the administrators of cultural heritage sites. The drafting and approval of a new law on cultural heritage as well as its bylaws which would better enhance the management and promotion but also scientific research in the field remains an absolute priority.

The professional capacity increase of those working in the cultural heritage sector with the aim of improving the management of cultural heritage values remains a top priority and the combination of the above with engaging those graduating from universities with specific orientation in this field remains an absolute priority for the future.

The development of cultural tourism on the other hand seems to be the new trend of the 21st century, and as such is worthy to be further analyzed and explored for its benefits, not only on the centers which are part of UNESCO, such as Butrint, Gjirokastra and Berat, but to include other centers with high potential and visitor centered approach in order to further turn them into reference points of tourism and heritage in the country. The cases of Apollonia, Shkodra, Durrës and Kruja could be supplemented further by Bylis, Antigonea, Finiq and many other archaeological parks, historic centers and particularly known monuments throughout the country.

Cultural tourism is not only linked to the identification, management and protection of cultural heritage, but also to economic growth, bringing much needed income and more access to culture. Cultural tourism can be considered as a mixture of cultural heritage, education and economic development. When developed within clearly set legal frameworks it helps directly in the promotion of the country and the improvement of citizens lives. Since cultural but also natural heritage has universal value and together create the legacy of humanity, it is fully in the public's interest to protect them and create sets of rules to use them efficiently.

The issues laid forward at the beginning of this paper, but also the their further discussion and subsequent thoughts regarding the management of cultural heritage in Albania, have certainly found their answer: every change that aims at improving the system of management is always welcomed by the professionals community and Albanian society. Time will prove if this chosen model which is improving by the day throughout the country is the best possible model, which can be classified as the European model.

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