Geographies of Transition: Heritage, Identity and Tourism in post-socialist Bulgaria

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

The thesis aims to critically evaluate the economic, political and socio-cultural role of heritage in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria, with a particular focus on the transition from state socialism to democratic market economy after 1989. In order to fulfil the aim, this study adopts the following research questions and objectives:

Objectives

(1) What is the economic importance of heritage in transition and how has it changed over time (1944-1989)? - this examines the

use of heritage and related tourism development as an economic resource in socialist Bulgaria (1944-1989), the post-1989 utilization of heritage as a strategic resource for national and international funding and post-1989 politics of tourism development

(2) What is the political importance of heritage during the transitional process and what changes have been made to the policies of heritage development, interpretation and management? - this explores the politics of heritage management and development in socialist Bulgaria (1944-1989) and how the (changing) heritage policy has been intertwined with the politics of national recognition and European integration (1989 –

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2016) while also examining the political influence over the redevelopment, designation and management of heritage sites in post-socialist era (1989 – 2016).

(3) What is the socio-cultural importance of heritage sites for (re)building national identities in transition? - this explores the legacy of socialist heritage after 1989 analysing the (re)assessment of its value as perceived by the local stakeholders, including stakeholders' attitudes and meanings attached to the status of World Heritage in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria.

Methodology

The qualitative research approach has been chosen as the most appropriate one for this study based on the exploratory nature of the research and more specifically, the aim to provide a comprehensive and holistic analysis of the changing value of cultural heritage in socialist and post-socialist era. Two of the three empirical chapters are based on case studies. The case study of Sofia is based on two representations of socialist heritage - 1300 Years Bulgaria Monument and the Museum of Socialist Art - and analyses the ongoing disputes and debates regarding the management and interpretation of socialist heritage in the post- 1989 era focusing on the changing importance of socialist heritage as sites of collective memory and potential (communist) heritage tourism attractions. The case study of Ancient City of Nessebar provides a comprehensive analysis about the state politics of heritage management and development at the time of nomination (early 1980s), political transition (post-1989) and EU accession (2007) and illustrates the changing value of World Heritage as a tool for economic regeneration, political recognition, and post-socialist identity construction.

The data collection involved two stages. First, archival research (e.g. policies, frameworks, official decrees and legislations) at Central State Archive in Sofia, Archives of the Committee of (Science) Art and Culture, Archives of Bulgarian Communist Party and Archives of the Committee for Tourism and Recreation, Archive of the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage, and official

newspaper publications such as *State Gazette* (1879-1950 and 1963 – 2016) and *Bulletin of the Presidium of the National Assembly* (1950-1963). Documents for the Ancient City of Nessebar (e.g nomination dossier, State of Conservation Reports and joint UNESCO/ICOMOS monitoring mission reports) were retrieved from the ICOMOS Documentation Centre in Charenton-le-Pont, France. Second, a long-term ethnography in Sofia and Nessebar based on participant observation and unstructured and semi-structured interviews with heritage experts and decision-makers involved in heritage management before and/or after 1989 (e.g. archaeologists, council officers, architects, museum directors).

Theoretical conclusions

This research enriches our understanding of 'transition' and adds to some previous contributions (e.g. Marcińczak *et al.* 2014) in various ways. First, it demonstrates the non-applicability of the conventional, mainstream transition theories and contradicts the neo-liberal theories that conceptualise 'transition' as straightforward economic and geopolitical changes. The analysis of the post-1989 changes in Bulgaria revealed a very complex, difficult and uneasy transition. In line with Smith & Pickles (1998), this research suggests that we need an alternative definition of 'transition' that moves beyond the lenses of post-socialist economic restructuring and democratic changes to consider the wider processes of cultural change, the reworking of social relations and the (re-)emergence of the national identity.

Second, this research on heritage policies in Bulgaria brings us to the problematic differentiation between 'transition' and 'transformation' (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). The study demonstrates that Bulgaria has gone through 'multiple transformations' but that none of these processes has been fully completed. First, the 'institutional transformations' have failed to completely erase the pre-1989 model of political, economic and cultural governance. Second, the 'cultural transition' is also not completed and despite the reforms and the proclaimed

decentralisation, the pre-1989 administrative model of cultural governance has been preserved. Moreover, the retention of some socialist elites within the heritage sector and their involvement in the post-1989 era have contributed to the slow 'transition' and limited progress towards EU integration. Overall, this research suggests that the understanding of 'transition' from an economic and political perspective is too simplistic and these only constitute the beginning of a long and complex 'transition'.

Practical application of the dissertation

The findings of this research demonstrated the prioritisation of the cultural heritage sector before 1989 and more specifically, the political utilization of heritage as an instrument of domestic and international propaganda. The study argues that the heavily centralised model of heritage management still influences the post-socialist (re)structuring of institutions and frameworks and the proclaimed 'decentralisation' and 'de-communisation' have not happened – rather contemporary Bulgaria has seen the retention of the former socialist elites in key roles and an even more centralised model of governance.

An important contribution of this study is the examination of the importance of socialist heritage sites across issues of identity, memory and tourism. Drawing on the Museum of Socialist Art and 1300 Years Bulgaria Monument, this research demonstrates the varied and contradictory meanings and values attached to socialist heritage sites since 1989. As the analysis of the both case studies reveal, the interpretation and understanding of socialist heritage in the post-socialist era is controversial and complex, largely as a result of the problematic 'authorised discourse' (Smith, 2006) and the highly politicised nature of heritage interpretation.

The multitude of stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes are also demonstrated with the changing value of World Heritage before and after 1989 with the case study of Ancient Nessebar. As the analysis reveals, the value

of World Heritage has changed as a result of the post-1989 economic stagnation, political instability and loss of state funding but there are continuities between periods, most obviously in the consistent differences between the perspectives of government and local residents.

Overall, the problematic and rather complex politics of interpretation, heavily centralised model of governance, and the changing values and meanings attached to heritage sites by the different stakeholders give us a more holistic view on the state of transition of Bulgaria – uncertain, driven by divergent political interests and confronted by the uncertainties that surround our own interpretation of the recent past.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

An introductory chapter that includes a contextual introduction to heritage and tourism, aim and objectives of the thesis and outline of the chapters.

Abstract of Chapter 2

Provides a concise multidisciplinary overview of heritage as a field of enquiry and contextualises some contemporary issues concerning heritage and its bonds with other theoretical concepts such as national identity, collective memory and heritage tourism. The chapter concludes with a brief critical discussion of these three concepts into the context of Central and Eastern Europe focusing on the heritage discourse before 1989 and the changing interpretation and management of heritage in the post-1989 era.

Abstract of Chapter 3

Explains the chosen research approach and presents a detailed description of the research design and the chosen research methods. It includes the rationale behind the chosen case study approach, the value of combining interviews, participant observation and archival research for understanding the role of heritage, and some reflections on my positionality as Bulgarian insider/outsider. The chapter concludes with the ethical consideration and a discussion of the

challenges and limitations faced in the research process.

Abstract of Chapter 4

Provides a chronological overview of heritage development and management at a national level before (1944-1989) and after the political changes (1989-2016). Based on analysis of legislative frameworks, cultural policies and previous studies, the chapter focuses on the introduction and development of the socialist model of heritage management and the impact of the post-1989 political changes over heritage management, development and interpretation. This chapter also discusses the use of heritage as a strategic resource for domestic and international tourism before and after 1989.

Abstract of Chapter 5

Examines the importance of socialist heritage sites across issues of identity, memory and tourism. Discusses the development, management and interpretation of socialist heritage sites in the capital city of Sofia. Focuses on the legacy of socialist heritage sites and discusses the contemporary challenges related to their management and interpretation in a post-socialist context by drawing on two case studies: the Museum of Socialist Art and 1300 Years Bulgaria Monument, this part of the thesis.

Abstract of Chapter 6

Explores the politics of heritage, development of heritage tourism and World Heritage designation of the Ancient City of Nessebar. The analysis goes back to the beginning of socialism and the initial period of heritage development (1950s – 1970s) and the nomination of Nessebar for World Heritage

Site (early 1980s), and explores the development of heritage in economic, socio-cultural and political dimensions. The main contribution of this chapter lies in the analyses of the stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes towards the value of World Heritage in two different historical periods.

Abstract of Chapter 7

Draws out in more detail the main arguments of the thesis and demonstrates how the research aims and objectives have been met. Brings together the findings of the research to suggest that there are a variety of ways heritage is understood and imagined under state-socialism and post-socialism and heritage management practices can tell us much about the political transition in Bulgaria.

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