

Digitization of Cultural and Historical Heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria – Priorities and Perspectives

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Abstract. The paper deals with digitization as a method of protecting and preserving cultural and historical heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria. It attempts to establish the level of development of this process in the country, to identify the good examples and information gaps in order to outline the priorities and perspectives.

Keywords: Digitization, Cultural and Historical Heritage, Armenians in Bulgaria

1 Introduction

This study is about the benefits of digitization as a specific approach of the overall process of protecting and preserving cultural heritage. It focuses on cultural and historical heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria. Topic is relevant because increasingly wide range of specialists is dealing with the problems of digitization. Here is available an analysis of digitization in aspect of preserving this heritage. In essence it is an integral part of the Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage, but it is also a heritage of minority community, which has general and specific characteristics and problems. They clearly reveal themselves in the process of digitization and require special attention. In terms of cultural and historical heritage, digitization may have social, moral, ethical, psychological, informational, educational, and economic dimension. The study aims to determine how digitization can assist the process of protecting and preserving the Armenian heritage, how and which part of the heritage is already digitized, how and by whom digitization is realized, where is the Armenian cultural heritage in the general process of digitization in Bulgaria.

Armenians are one of the traditional ethno-religious communities in Bulgaria. For centuries they have inhabited Bulgarian lands and take part in the ethnic mosaic of Bulgaria since the establishment of the state. There are verifications for Armenian presence of historical, archaeological, linguistic etc. character [3,4]. From the late 19th and early 20th century because of some consecutive historical events, the number of Armenians in Bulgaria considerably increased, therefore the amount of delayed by the community cultural heritage increases too.

At the moment official data on the exact number of Armenians in Bulgaria does not exist. This is because in the last census of National Statistical Institute in 2011 the ethnic and religious marker was optional indicating. Based on unofficial data about the number of the Armenian community in the country, cited by the Embassy of Armenia in Bulgaria, it is possible to calculate its relative share in total Bulgarian population – about 0.4%. The population of Armenians in Bulgaria is mainly concentrated in the cities and most of them are in Plovdiv, Sofia, Varna, Bourgas, Rousse, Haskovo and Shumen [9]. Protection and preservation of cultural heritage of the community should not depend on its quantitative aspects, but mainly the qualitative aspects of its heritage. This process is closely linked with the policy to protect cultural diversity, which is also a leading principle of the EU.

2 Benefits of Digitization

2.1 Protection and Preservation via Digitization

Protection and Preservation of cultural and historical heritage in the natural world often requires many resources and comprehensive care. Under the influence of several environmental, demographic, political, economic, religious and social factors, some of its elements are seriously damaged, completely destroyed or at risk. This applies to heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria too. The methods of preservation and conservation are different and digitization is one of them. Before we talk about the protecting and preserving of Armenian heritage, first it is necessary to clarify its structure. It can generally be divided by kind: tangible and intangible. The types of material Armenian heritage: churches and chapels, architectural sites and urban ensembles, memorable places and memorials, documents, books and periodicals. The types of intangible heritage are: oral and folk music, traditional crafts, festivals and customs, clothing, kitchen. In close connection and also a guarantee for the protection of heritage is preservation of identity and language.

Tangible Armenian cultural heritage in Bulgaria in terms of property is state, municipal and private. The form of ownership is important for the approach and methods for its conservation and preservation. One of the major findings in my field research in institutions such as museum, some sections of the library, archive and radio, is that on state and municipal level there is no practice to highlight Armenian heritage at ethnic or religious aspect. In the most cases there is no reference mechanism to assist it to be traced. However, the state and municipal cultural institutions responsibly take care of the preservation of Armenian heritage but it is necessary to raise the level of its promotion and socialization. Exploring opportunities for digitizing cultural heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria and the current status of this process is part of a larger study of realized and potential opportunities for preserving heritage as a whole in Bulgaria. In this sense digitization is an integral part of the main process.

Specific ability of cultural and historical heritage is maintaining cultural identity. Its importance is even greater in case of minority ethnic and religious communities. Digitization offers new way of communication between people and their heritage – through digital dimension. It is well known that the Armenians in Bulgaria are among

the best integrated community in a condition of preserved cultural identity [9]. Exploring this community we found that preserving identity is not guaranteed. Something more – Armenians demonstrate a delicate boundary between the high level of integration and the opportunity of loss of cultural identity. This situation requires new approach for protection and preservation of its cultural values. It became clear that the family is not able to deal alone with this problem. Armenian cultural institutions in the country are trying to compensate for that fact, but they operate under great financial difficulties. That is why they achieve some partial results. Digital technology and its appropriate application support the preservation of cultural identity.

The questions that concern heritage are: what part of it should be digitized, which elements should not be digitized because of their security status and how this information will be presented.

Armenian culture and historical heritage should be comprehensive represented in digital form. This means that digitization should include specimens of all elements of its structure to ensure its preservation process. The elements should not be ranked in importance, because each of them is connected with the history, culture and identity of the Armenian community in Bulgaria. However three very important circumstances should be reported. Firstly, scientifically Armenian heritage has not been fully investigated. Relatively well studied is the intangible heritage [9]–[11], religious architecture [2,5], tombstones [6,7], etc. This is essential for selecting objects for digitization as well for truthfully presenting the information. Secondly, organized digitization will be performed according to the availability of items of Armenian cultural heritage in the holder institution. Secondly, organized digitization will be performed according to the availability of items of cultural heritage institution holder. This will allow making thematic digital records and will also threaten some of the items to stay apart from this process. Thirdly, the guiding principle in defining the scope of digitization should be the level of risk for heritage. In my opinion, an important part of Armenian cultural and historical heritage that should be digitized because of the conditions of risk is the documentary heritage. On the one hand, according to my research, the Armenians in Bulgaria considered a priority issue for the preservation of their language. They meet some difficulties in finding teachers in mother language for their children. Most of the Armenians speak Western Armenian not Eastern Armenian – the official language in Armenia where from they receive some school books. In Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski there is a mayor of Armenian Studies but it is about Eastern Armenian too [8]. According to my interviews conducted with different representatives of the Armenian community in Bulgaria, the knowledge of oral Armenian is more widespread than written Armenian. This is because of the communication in the family. In addition, in Bulgaria there are not many libraries where you can read Armenian literature. All of that require the digitization of some Armenian books and journals. On the other hand, some of the Armenian documentary collections are not well protected. For example there are some NGOs rich funds in need of space for library and archive. Until finding those areas, document protection is questionable.

The most valuable elements of any heritage should be carefully analyzed and assessed in the process of digitization. This is imposed by objective requirements for

their security. A good example in this regard is already digitized by the National Library Four Gospels, which is a unique Armenian artifact.

There are some specific requirements for presentation of content and description of Armenian heritage in digital format – unless we need a uniform format and easy access, it must be scientifically described and complied with the essential character of the heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria: part of the Bulgarian national heritage, which differs from that in Armenia and that in Diaspora.

2.2 Popularization and Socialization via Digitization

As we know Internet has become a basic resource of life that society use for receiving information, knowledge, experience and emotions. Armenian community in Bulgaria is relatively active in cyberspace. The issues that are presented online are often related to their social and culture life.

When we talk about protecting and preserving cultural and historical heritage we rely on young people who are the future of this heritage. Of course they actively use the opportunities of the 21st century, especially when it comes to ICT. In the same time there is a big gap between traditionalism as a characteristic of the cultural heritage and the explosion of new computer technologies. Appropriate way this communication distance to be overcome is through the introduction of modern technologies in the processes of promotion and popularization of cultural and historical heritage. This can be done via digitization of the heritage.

A possible successful form of popularization and socialization of cultural and historical heritage is by presenting it in an accurate and attractive way. In a result the digital heritage will reach faster and easier to masses of people. This will help better understanding why we are different and how we participate in the cultural diversity of the world. The Armenian cultural and historical heritage must be populated not only because of the community but because of everyone. It is their right and obligation to participate equally with other communities in the digital space.

Digitization of heritage aims to attract more people from the Armenian community to recognize themselves, their traditions and history in this heritage. In my experience the Armenian community is closed with respect to their traditions but they are not popular as the traditions of other communities. Digital space offers an effective way to attract interest.

Other benefit of digitizing is that the digital presentation can be a base for alternative products – various types of studies, documentary films, tourist files etc.

A large part of the Armenian heritage is poorly explored because of it low accessibility. In addition is the heritage that is individual or family property, both not presented in the public area. The organization of this heritage for public display by a change of ownership at the moment would be difficult not only because of the financial aspect, but mainly because of the sentimental engagement of its owners. Private Armenian heritage is still in possession of the first and second generation Armenian immigrants from the last century. Dramatic historical value is still leading and few would exchange it for cash. We may suppose that in time this circumstance will change. From my conversations with some members of the community it is clear that many of them

are tend to provide grant to digitize their property or to arrange temporary display, such as exhibitions. That is why the digital information space is an appropriate place to populate and socialize that heritage without changing its property.

The wide and open access will encourage specialists from different fields to explore the Armenian cultural heritage. Until now it has been partly studied mainly from community representatives.

3 Current Status

3.1 Good Examples and Priorities

When we do a research on digital cultural and historical heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria, first we have to make some adjustments. For purposes of the research we will look at some of the best examples of already digitized objects of heritage. In this case by the concept of digitization we must not understand all digital projections of cultural and historical heritage of the Armenian community in Bulgaria, but only that part that is organized digitized. This clarification is made for needs of the research because it is not possible and appropriate to cover all examples. We will try to find the best examples and the information gaps. Exploring the purpose for digitizing and functions it must perform we will try to identify the priority areas.

Undoubtedly one of the priorities of the Bulgarian national cultural institutions is the digitization of heritage. In carefully search their digital funds, we can find some elements of Armenian heritage.

There is a good example that refers to the immovable tangible cultural heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria. We define this group as risk because we see how small the preserved part of Armenian architecture in Bulgaria is. Much of this heritage is destroyed as a result of urban change, disasters and demographic changes [1]. Best preserved is the religious architecture but most damaged is the residential architecture. We present an example of digitization of one of the most emblematic Armenian houses that is an immovable cultural value in the category of “national importance”. This is the house of a rich Armenian merchant Stepan Hindlian in Plovdiv. Its digitization is performed after the implementation of emergency restoration activities funded by UNESCO. Today this object of the Armenian cultural heritage which is turned into museum is very important because of its architectural and artistic value but also because it is a strategic tourist site.

Digitization of the house is part of a project of the municipality for "Virtual tour of Plovdiv". The project started in 2008 and until now it is continuously expanding. Its tasks are to ensure wider access to people around the world to the cultural wealth of the city. The presentation allows the examination of the major cultural sites in Plovdiv in a new and innovative way. In addition to presenting and promoting cultural heritage, the IT project aims to increase the tourism in the city. Similar approaches are used to attract tourists in many European cities like Milan, Barcelona, Amsterdam, etc. Virtual tour is a type of presentation and allows 360° panoramic tour where the visitor chooses which place in the interior or exterior to visit. The effect of such presentation many times exceeds the capabilities of digital photos. This type of visual-

ization is very attractive and looks like the computer games. The virtual card displays different digitized objects in Plovdiv that includes house of Hindlian is available through the website of the municipality¹. House of Hindlian's visualization presents views from the yard, halls on the first and second floor, bedroom, and bathroom.

Also we must mention the efforts of the Armenian community itself to make public their heritage through the digital projection. Very active in this respect are some websites of the Armenian churches in the country. There are presented different digitized elements of the cultural and historical heritage such as monuments and memorable places, historical photographs, religious items, icons, books, scientific researches etc. Remarkable example is the website of Church Surp Kevork where are published digitized objects from the museum collection to the crypt². This digital collection is a unique, it presents valuable religious and documentary cultural heritage of the Armenians in Bulgaria. Religion, language and traditions are essential for the preservation of identity. The Church makes great efforts to preserve the religious tradition and digitization seems to be a part of this policy. This includes both spiritual and material values. Thus the heritage is a priority subject of conservation and a tool for preservation of identity. It is clear that digitization is a priority, but the problem is that it is done non-standardized and it is not included in any digital network of heritage. This makes the digital collection marginalized and narrows its ability to perform its functions – popularization and socialization.

For the achievement of these targets the international platforms are particularly relevant. They collect and store digital information for cultural heritage while providing wide access to it online. One of the most recent examples is the European initiative Europeana, which has become a kind of virtual museum and library for Europe. Completion of digital funds may be done by organized digitization. On the Bulgarian side, Varna Regional Library "Pencho Slaveikov" is particularly active, and among its digitized and related Europeana materials can be found some information about the Bulgarian Armenians and their cultural and historical heritage. It is useful that this platform provides a much needed reference mechanism that allows a keyword search, respectively discover the unexpected by type and size materials. Joining Europeana by the cultural institutions is supported with euro funding opportunities. Through the implementation of some projects, parts of Armenian heritage objectively will fall in the European digital cultural space.

3.2 Information Gaps and Perspectives

Information gaps in perspective will be increasingly limited. This is because of the rapid spread of technology in the world of culture and the opposite – culture in the world of technology.

What are causal agents of information gaps in the digital space? On the one hand, these are the organizations responsible for Armenian cultural and historical heritage. On the other hand, this is the community.

¹ www.plovdiv.bg

² www.surpkevork.com

Some of the Armenian cultural heritage in Bulgaria is in possession of state and municipal cultural institutions such as libraries, archives and museums. Due to the high level of integration of the Armenian community in the Bulgarian society these institutions follow policies that do not present it separately. This is evidence of the sensitivity of the boundary between integration and preservation of cultural identity.

For example, craft products that are made of Armenian goldsmiths and that are indicative of the level of Armenian goldsmith's craft in the country, in museum are presented as part of the Bulgarian traditional crafts. It is difficult for the ordinary visitor to distinguish their Armenian connectivity. Thus the Armenian cultural heritage can be hardly differentiated and explored. Up to the moment in Bulgaria in this category can be identified digitalized only isolated cases like Armenian Four Gospels from 966, which is stored in the National Library St. St. Cyril and Methodius³. With careful and focused review of digital funds of leading museums, libraries and archives can be found and other single examples, but they are extremely insufficient to illustrate the cultural and historical heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria. With the accumulation of digital materials, the outlook for these institutions is to move towards the realization of organized exhibition on the basis of different sign – thematic, chronological, etc. in order to correspond to the expectations for popularization and socialization.

The most of the Armenian NGOs that own or that are responsible for Armenian cultural heritage do not actively digitize probably for financial reasons. But they are very consistent in their publications in an electronic version of the events of social and cultural life of the community. This often includes reports of various celebrations and festivals, performances of dance and music groups, religious events and traditions. In the future, these activities could be very useful for formation of a digital presentation of the intangible aspects of Armenian culture.

The main information gaps in the digital presentation of the Armenian cultural and historical heritage due to financial difficulties. This problem is accompanying cultural activities in general and especially digitization, which is a very expensive process. As a priority in the cultural politics of Europe for the digitization of cultural heritage are provided funds for various programs and projects. At present, the main European programs funding such activities are ICT PSP and Culture 2007-2013. Also remarkable are the achievements of Multinational Corporations like Google Inc. The general impression is that Bulgaria slowly absorbs EU funds for the digitization of its cultural heritage. The most serious are the achievements of libraries as well as the resent work of the archives. At the national level this policy is also accepted and it realizes the role and importance of digitization, but in terms of culture and heritage funding mechanisms are poorly break. In this area should be given a priority to increase its share in the process of digitization. At this stage there is no project with external or internal funding, which specifically to relate to the Armenian's heritage in Bulgaria. I think funding opportunities by individuals in the community are not sufficiently explored the idea is not widely promoted. At the same time funding of Armenian NGOs in the country is practically very difficult due to funds deficit. However, in the country there are two branches of Armenian NGOs AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent

³ www.nationallibrary.bg

Union "Parekordzagan") – in Sofia and Plovdiv. Their colleagues from the French branch in cooperation with Centro Studi e Documentazione della Cultura Armena (Italy) and Inside Europe (Belgium) and the partner from Armenia – Research on Armenian Architecture (RAA) have won the project under Culture 2007–2013 of the European Commission. Armeniaca project is for digitization of written and photographic archives related to Armenian monumental architecture⁴. Their experience demonstrates that European funding can be provided, but the prospect is Armenian NGOs in Bulgaria to be more active in this regard and to initiate similar projects. They could be particularly useful as partners on projects to connect this heritage to Europeana and other international and European digital spaces.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, can be indicated some basic similarities between the problems in the overall protection and preservation of Armenian heritage and problems in its digitization:

Both processes require interdisciplinary approach and greater absorbing of government and European funds.

There is still no comprehensive scientific study of cultural and historical heritage of Armenians in Bulgaria, but only separate studies of some of its elements. In the process of digitization can be ascertained partly realization and most of the elements of the heritage still do not have digital dimension.

Both the primary and secondary processes occur in terms of lack of clear government strategy for development, making it difficult to achieve lasting and sustainable results. In order to determine the approach, the volume and type of Armenian cultural and historical heritage, which is essential to be digitized should be generating debate between public cultural institutions, representatives of the Armenian community and their NGOs, digitization professionals, and specialists in cultural and historical heritage. It must be guaranteed that all categories of its structure will be covered and only then to make the selection and action plan. It would not be credible to think about strategy for digitization before clarify the strategy for protecting and preserving the cultural and historical heritage of Bulgaria.

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