



БЪЛГАРСКА ФОНДАЦИЯ
БИОРАЗНООБРАЗИЕ
КЛОН БЕЛАСИЦА

**Project title: Feasibility Study for Trans-border
Biosphere Reserve Osogovo
Ref.: 2007CB16IP0007-2012-3-047**



Final Report - Summary

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL HERITAGE

Feasibility Study for Trans-border Biosphere Reserve Osogovo

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May 2015



This project is co financed by European Union through



- IPA CROSS- BORDER PROGRAMME
CCI Number 2007CB161P0007



The work done by me as an Expert of Cultural and Historical Heritage in the implementation period of the contract was in line with the detailed Terms of Reference, part of the documentation of the tender procedure, and with the Inception Report approved by the Contracting Authority (BBF). It included the following:

- I. Taking part in the assessment of Osogovo's conservation function in terms of cultural and historical significance and the need to protect those values.

This included preliminary exploration of available and accessible information sources (historical, specialized and tourist publications, reports from former studies, reviews, relevant Web pages, etc.). In order to access those sources, I worked in close contact with the other experts and with the project team members, namely the representatives of BBF – Belasitsa Branch and of the Faculty of Food and Agriculture of Strumica who had previous experience in the region and provided me with valuable hints as to what information sources might be available. The list of information sources used is given in Annex 3 to this report.

The next phase was to analyse the available information, identify information gaps and needs, and plan on-spot visits to all 10 municipalities from the target area (2 in Bulgaria, 8 in Macedonia). On-spot visits included interviews with local people and institutions (local municipalities and some village mayors, museums and sites, other cultural institutions such as the Chitalishte in Kyustendil, NGOs and team members of implemented projects related to the cultural and historical heritage)

On the spot I also made visits to selected heritage sites. I did not make visits to all registered sites for the following reasons:

- Interviews with local experts and institutions showed that a visit to the site would be pointless as nothing or almost nothing is seen 'on the ground' from the site at present, e.g. the site is only registered but not studied and not excavated; or it has been studied and excavated but all finds have been stored in a certain museum and the site has been conserved. Most archaeological sites appeared to be in that status.
- Immaterial cultural heritage was to me equally important as material values. And this immaterial heritage could not be studied and assessed through visits to sites.

- Connected with the above, I only had limited time to spend in each municipality, and I had to prioritize my needs of information, meetings with people and travel.

My selection of sites to visit was based on the significance of the site as an object of cultural heritage. For the site visits, I prepared a special form (“passport” for each site) which was consulted with the Contracting Authority. Each “passport” contains the basic information about the site, GPS-coordinates and photos. The filled-in “passports” are given in Annex 2 to this report. The detailed information collected by me is given in Annex 1 to the report while the summary of my findings is given in Annex 4. The analysis of the advantages and disadvantages (strengths and weaknesses) of the cultural potentials is given below.

- II. I took part in all three meetings of all the experts and the project team – in the beginning of the studies, in the middle, and at the end.
- III. I tried my best to assist other experts and the project team where necessary and possible, for the successful finalization of the feasibility study for Osogovo Biosphere Reserve.
- IV. Based on the findings, I prepared information for inclusion into the dossier/nomination form of Osogovo as Biosphere Reserve, see below.
- V. I prepared summary information for PR purposes of the project which is also given below.

Systematization of strengths and weaknesses – Osogovo cultural and historical heritage

Strengths

- Osogovo Mountains can be seen as one ‘heritage unit’, that is, with a common cultural and historical heritage despite the borders that cross it.
- At the same time, in the broader context of the whole municipalities that compile it, the Osogovo Region has a sufficient variety of cultural and historical heritage to create focus(es) of interest.
- There are archaeological traces of several different historic periods, including Prehistory.
- There are archaeological (also architectural and artistic) monuments of national importance for Bulgaria and Macedonia respectively.
- Samples of traditional architecture are still preserved in many places around the region.

- The region has a number of interesting religious monuments of different periods, some with architectural and artistic values as well.
- The region has a network of museums that keep valuable samples of the cultural and historical heritage and can serve as a focus of attention.
- There is a wealth of various myths and legends still living in the region.
- The richness of musical and dance folklore of the area is well preserved and respected by local people.
- Local people practiced a variety of crafts that could be successfully interpreted and utilized in the modern world.
- The region has a rich and varied cultural agenda, including both traditional celebrations and modern events.
- Local cuisine is delicious and attractive.

Weaknesses

- There are potential points of conflict concerning the interpretation of history (historical heritage) between the citizens of the Bulgarian and Macedonian parts of the region.
- Archaeological monuments are not in a very good condition – some are only registered but not studied or even dated; others have been studied but not exhibited; third are not maintained.
- Access to many of the sites (archaeological but also architectural and religious) is very difficult, especially in the higher and more isolated parts of the mountain.
- The condition of many of the architectural sites is very poor, especially of those that are found in isolated (depopulated) villages. They are in serious danger to be lost forever.
- Many of the religious monuments also need maintenance and better access.
- The museum network of the region is not actually operational; many museums are hard to find and visit.
- The heritage of myths and legends is thoroughly studied only in some parts of the region; the others face a threat of serious heritage loss once the old people who are potential sources of information are gone.
- The ethnography of the region is poorly promoted and utilized.
- Many of the once living and diverse crafts are now lost or face extinction once the last people practicing them are gone.

- The cultural agenda of the region is poorly valorized and promoted.

Opportunities for protection and valorization of the cultural heritage of Osogovo Region

(for the purposes of the Feasibility Study for Osogovo Biosphere Reserve)

The region that might one day become the biosphere reserve of Osogovo is neither unique in terms of cultural and historic heritage nor exceptionally rich. In fact, in terms of quantity and quality of sites and assets, it is very much similar to other regions, even neighbouring ones in Bulgaria and Macedonia. The uniqueness or abundance of cultural assets, however, is not among the conditions for the designation of a biosphere reserve. Cultural heritage is usually seen as a secondary, supporting factor in the process of preserving the environment while securing a better life for local people.

From that point of view, Osogovo Region has much to offer if the right steps are taken towards the valorization of its cultural and historical heritage. But in order to be valorized, that heritage must first be identified and protected. For the first step – identification – we could say that most has already been done, except for the immaterial cultural heritage and especially local tales, myths and legends. The information exists in pieces at various sources and this report is the first attempt to summarize and structure it. For the purposes of a biosphere reserve and sustainable development, it would be better if this information is arranged into a database, then expanded. It will need to be easily accessible and operational if valorization will be done.

The second step – protection of the cultural and historical heritage – is more difficult because it requires the combined efforts of many people and institutions, including for planning, projecting and fund-raising. Since a biosphere reserve IS supposed to be a combined effort of many people and institutions united by a common vision, we could assume that in this case heritage protection might be easier.

Just for illustration, by ‘protection of the cultural and historical heritage’, I mean the following here:

- Preventing the destruction of valuable archaeological monuments and sites caused by natural or artificial (caused by human activity) factors – floods, fires, earthquakes as well as construction of roads, dams or another type of infrastructure.

- Preventing the loss of cultural heritage due to thefts or illegal treasure-hunting.
- 'Bringing to the light' of hidden (already stolen) cultural heritage in private collections – possible opening of private museums.
- Maintenance of sites such as churches, chapels, old houses, medieval towers and old baths – constant repairs and renovations when needed.
- Keeping the knowledge of traditional practices and 'oral folklore' for the generations.
- Preserving the skill, even only for information purposes, of traditional handicrafts and cuisine.

Finally, the valorization of the cultural and historical heritage of Osogovo Region will undoubtedly help to achieve the goals of a biosphere reserve. It can bring employment and benefits to local people in a sustainable, environmentally-friendly way. For that purpose, the cultural assets of the area are more than enough as both quality and quantity.

Possible ways of valorization of the cultural and historical heritage of Osogovo include:

1. Reviving old crafts as souvenir production and demonstration or training courses. A good example may be basket weaving. It is not a very difficult, long to learn craft, nor requires expensive and specific equipment, tools or materials. It can easily be translated into short courses for people to learn how to make small items, or into a production of various products to be sold as not so expensive souvenirs.
2. Reviving old everyday practices as souvenir production and demonstration or training courses. The principle is same as above, especially if food-production, for example, is seen as a traditional craft. Such practices could be the making of yoghurt, cheese or butter, preparation of rakia or wine, etc.
3. Introducing traditional cuisine into contemporary places to eat. If every restaurant in the region has some special local dish or dishes in the menu, this will create local identity and focus of branding and interest. It could also add value to the original menu.
4. Revitalizing museum expositions by applying modern tools and technologies. The static museum exposition is slowly going into oblivion in the modern world. A modern museum is expected to use interactive presentation techniques, in at least English as an additional language.
5. Expanding local celebrations and holidays; enriching the programmes, making better promotion. All in all, attracting greater audiences.

6. Bringing life to archaeological, architectural or religious sites by training local guides who could present the site in the best possible way to various audiences.
7. Dramatizing old customs and rituals as an attraction and as means to revitalize historical sites. Such an example could be the demonstration of the Lazaruvane custom in some old houses – samples of traditional architecture.

Information for PR purposes of the project

The region of Osogovo, as one mountain, can mostly be defined as a joint unit in terms of historical and cultural heritage, with certain variations resulting from the passing of boundaries at certain points. The region in the broader context, including the whole territories of the municipalities of Cheshinovo-Obleshevo, Delchevo, Kochani, Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Makedonska Kamenitsa, Probishtip and Rankovce from the Macedonian side, and Kyustendil and Nevestino from the Bulgarian side, is not so homogenous because it also covers parts of other geographical units such as Konyavska and Maleshevska Mountains, Piyanets, etc.

The region has had a long, turbulent and very interesting history. It has been inhabited since prehistoric times and there are valuable remains from the Neolithic, Eneolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages. Of special attention is the locality of Tsotsev Kamen near the village of Shopsko Rudare, Kratovo Municipality in Macedonia, with the rock drawings from 25000 ago. Roman heritage is the most abundant in the region, and the pearl here is undoubtedly the town of Pautalia (today's Kyustendil) with the second largest Asklepion in the Roman World. Medieval heritage is less represented although it is quite certain that the area has not been less populated at that time. The church of Sveti Georgi in Kyustendil is one of the finest samples of that period. Medieval towers stand around the area as tokens of history. Such are the towers of the towns of Kratovo and Kochani, the village of Chiflik (Delchevo Municipality) and the Pirkova Tower in the town of Kyustendil. A renowned Medieval symbol is the Kadin Bridge in Nevestino Village.

The jewels of religious heritage in the area are undoubtedly the Monastery of Sveti Yoakim Osogovski in Kriva Palanka and the Monastery of Sveti Gavril Lesnovski in Lesново Village, Probishtip Municipality. Among the other religious sites, interest also deserve the Monastery of Sveti Panteleymon in Panteley Village, Kochani Municipality; the so-called Elenets Monastery above the village of Tsera, Makedonska Kamenitsa Municipality; the church of Gorgi Kratovski

in the town of Kratovo; the church of Uspenie Bogorodichno in the town of Kyustendil and many others.

Among the 10 municipalities of the explored region, Kyustendil is undoubtedly the town of museums, although Kratovo itself is widely known as the biggest open-air museum of the area. The personal heritage of one of the greatest Balkan and European artists of the early 20th c. – Vladimir Dimitrov the Master – deserves special attention. The museums in the Macedonian part of the region: the historical museums of Kratovo, Delchevo and Kriva Palanka and the museum collections of Kochani and Probishtip keep valuable samples of the heritage of the region.

Folklore heritage of the area is part of, and closely connected to the ethnographic area of Shopluk / the Shopi ethnos. It includes various beliefs and rituals related to the ordinary things and events in life (incl. birth, death, wedding, etc.); specific holidays and celebrations that present a colourful mixture of Christian beliefs and old pagan rituals (e.g. Badnik, Surva, Babinden, Prikladi, Todoritsa, Easter, and many others). The music and dances are typical of the Shopi group but at the periphery other ethnographic influences start to appear, like for instance the Maleshevo influence to the south of Delchevo. Local costumes are probably one of the best preserved parts of the heritage.

The cultural agenda of the area is quite rich and varied. There are the folklore events (festivals, contests) that promote local folklore but also attract participants from other parts of the Balkans. Such are the Golachki Folklore Meetings in Delchevo, the International Folklore Festival of Sveti Yoakim Osogovski in Kriva Palanka, the Balkan Rug Festival in the village of Shishkovtsi and the Struma Sings Festival in Nevestino. Various art events compile a big percentage of the cultural agenda, incl. the DAF (the Amateur Theatre Festival) in Kochani; the Theatrical Festival of Sveti Yoakim Osogovski in Kriva Palanka; the art planers in Kochani, Kratovo (for children), Kriva Palanka (together with the wood-carving planer and the architecture school); Lesnovo Monastery. Contemporary music is also present in the agenda, with the JOY Rock Fest in Kriva Palanka, the True Sound of Kamenitsa festival of street culture or the July White Night in Probishtip. Some events are very specific and, as such, must be given special attention – e.g. the Cherry Festival and the Fertility Holiday in Kyustendil; the Piyanets-Maleshevo Wedding in Delchevo; the Days of Kochani Rice; the Brides' Pilgrimage on Todoritsa at the church of Sveti Theodor Tiron in Konopnitsa Village, Kriva Palanka Municipality; the National Meetings of

Pensioners at Elenets Monastery (village of Tsera, Makedonska Kamenitsa Municipality) with the contest of Grandma's Pastry.

As a conclusion, it may be noted that the Region of Osogovo is a place where history and tradition are still alive and may be preserved for the future generations, if all responsible institutions and individuals join efforts and start working together for a better future.