

The Palace and Botanical Garden in Balchik – a Possible Nomination for Cultural Landscape of the UNESCO List

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Abstract: The research is a proposal for the UNESCO list of the Palace and Botanical Garden of Balchik for cultural landscape. It is structured following the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention. The research could serve as a proposal for cultural landscape for Bulgaria as the country does not have a single one of this type on the World Heritage List.

Key words: World Heritage Sites, nominated property, Queen Maria, criteria, outstanding universal value, integrity, authenticity

Ключови думи: Обекти в списъка за световно наследство, номиниран обект, Кралица Мария, критерии, изключително световно значение, цялост, автентичност



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The Palace and Botanical Garden could be nominated as a world heritage site under the category for cultural landscapes according to type i): landscape designed and created intentionally by man – gardens or parkland. This would be the first nomination of Bulgaria for cultural landscape. Initially introduced as a category back in 1992, cultural landscapes are of three types: i) **landscape designed and created intentionally by people**. This embraces garden and parkland landscapes constructed for aesthetic reasons which are often (but not always) associated with religious or other monumental buildings and ensembles; then ii) **organically evolved landscape** – that falls in two subcategories: a relict (or fossil) landscape and a continuing landscape and iii) **associative cultural landscape** where the natural element dominates.¹

¹ Based on the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, WHC.24/01.



1. Flower garden with view to the sea at the bottom.

1. IDENTIFICATION OF THE NOMINATED PROPERTY

1.a Country: Bulgaria

1.b State, Province or Region: Town of Balchik, Region of Dobrich, North-East Bulgaria

1.c Name of potential nominated property: Architectural Complex the Palace with Botanical Garden – Cultural Landscape

2. DESCRIPTION OF NOMINATED PROPERTY

2.a Summary description and history of the potential nominated property

The garden was built by the Romanian queen Maria (1875–1938) as a summer residence. At the time after the Balkan War in 1913 this part of Bulgaria was included in the territory of Romania for almost 27 years. It was restituted to Bulgaria in 1940 in a diplomatic way, peacefully. Struck by the natural beauty of the place, Regina Maria built a palace and a garden there. The construction started in 1924 and lasted by 1931. It is not the architectural complex that makes the place so attractive but the awesome garden.

Situated on a steep hillside it is a terrace park with view to the sea. There is natural

water that falls into beautiful waterfalls and a rock garden by the small river. The abundance of water refreshes the air, especially during the hot summer days.

There are 3 000 plant species in the Botanical Garden – trees, shrubs and flowers from all over the world. One of the most beautiful and famous among the 200 tree species is the Magnolia tree. Its wonderful white blossoms provoke admiration. It is appreciated for another reason too – the fact that it does not usually grow in Bulgaria but the mild sea climate allows it to survive the winter. There are 1 500 kind of flowers and their scent is indescribable. It is very beautiful upon entering the top terrace and seeing the carpet of different flowers there and the blue sea shimmering at the end of the terrace.

The rose garden is also very rich. But the most notable part of the garden is the place where the cactus collection is. It is really impressive with about 250 cactus species. The collection is the second largest in Europe after the one in Monaco.

There is a French garden with clipped box trees and geometric beds.

Set among streams, waterfalls and ornamental channels the garden is really wonderful, especially during the hot summer

days. The plants of the garden are mostly from Europe, Asia and America. Designed by the French gardener Jules Jeannie, the garden has been part of the teaching facilities of Sofia University since 1955. Among the first to work there have been the landscape designer Nikola Minchev and the technical manager Nikola Momchilov. Due to the climate its profile is tropical and subtropical exotic plants. Apart from the cactus collection, it is famous also with its succulent plants that altogether outnumber 600 species. A greenhouse has been built, that although does not quite fit aesthetically to the whole architectural ensemble, allows such plants to be preserved and exhibited all throughout the year round.

What is interesting about the palace is its unique architecture – a combination of oriental and western motives. Queen Maria Alexandrina Victoria of Edinburgh, a grand – daughter of Queen Victoria has spent her childhood on the island of Malta. It is considered that she liked the oriental architecture there and she wanted to have such elements in her favorite residence. The town of Balchik, inhabited not only by Bulgarians but by people from various background – Turks, Gypsies, etc. shows how different cultures coexist peacefully on one and the same place, so the architecture of the palace reflected on it by the mixture of oriental and occidental elements.

Dispersed among the garden are the palace, the chapel, a villa complex consisting of 10 villas, a water mill and a Roman bath. The Palace was called 'The Quiet Nest' and it was really quiet, situated near the sea were only the sound of the waves was audible. The place is at the very bottom of the bay of Balchik and the sea there is usually serene.

The queen loved the place so much that her will was to have her heart kept after her death in the small chapel in the garden. And it was fulfilled. The chapel itself is a one nave church built predominantly by Balchik stone – limestone typical for the region. The Queen's heart remained in the church by 1940 when the territory was returned to Bulgaria. The heart was escorted to Romania then.

Among the buildings of interest are the villas of the Queen's children and the water mill, which was built in a traditional Bulgarian

style. There is a 'silver' Well and a Bridge of Sights there also. The Italian architects Americo and Augustino designed the buildings for the summer residence.

The Roman bath is related to the Romanian conception that the Romanians are the descendants of the Romans. Buildings with Roman motives could be found in Bucharest and other part of Romania as well.

There are a lot of stone crosses all over the garden as the Queen used to collect such objects. They add something mystical to the place. It was considered that the Queen Maria was a follower of the Bahai religion, which preaches equality and conciliation between the religions in the world with one common God to all.

2.b History and Development

As the area close to the sea is not very stable and there is a threat that the buildings might fall down towards the sea, in the 1980-s a project was implemented to strengthen the shore so that the land to be protected. Thus, some more territory was added in front of the complex and the sea remained further but all this did not change the property's integrity, just the buffer zone in a way expanded as water was pushed off further from the shore. This was with the purpose of strengthening the shore and protecting the area.

3. JUSTIFICATION FOR INSCRIPTION & CRITERIA UNDER WHICH INSCRIPTION IS PROPOSED

3.1.a Brief synthesis

The Architectural Complex the Palace with the Botanical Garden were initially built as a royal summer residence of the Romanian Queen Maria while this territory was taken from Bulgaria after the Balkan war. After its restitution in a diplomatic way in 1940 and the establishment of the communist regime four years later, in 1944, the ownership of the property became statal and it was in 1955 when the Botanical Garden was established. One of the biggest attractions is the collection of giant cacti growing outdoors from April to October. This is the second of this kind in Europe after that one in Monaco. The collection of 600 specimens

of giant succulents, some of which bloom only once in 100 years is also impressive. Between the most beautiful wildflowers in the garden are the water lilies and the magnolias, as well as the gorgeously arranged collection of annual plants at the entrance. The selection of palm-trees includes 33 species, some of which are more than 50 years old. Here you can see rare and exotic trees such as rubber trees, oriental raisin trees, paper mulberry, red juniper, ancient Ginkgo biloba, evergreen magnolia, etc. Of interest is also the Metasequoia, which was considered extinct until during a scientific expedition in China a Bulgarian scholar found a living plant.

3.1.b Criteria under which inscription is proposed (and justification for inscription under these criteria)

The Architectural Complex the Palace with the Botanical Garden could be nominated as a world heritage site under the category 1 for cultural landscapes: landscape designed and created intentionally by man – gardens or parkland. It can be inscribed as a mixed property under criteria (ii), (v) and (vii)

(ii) At the beginning of 20th century, the Palace with its garden showed the connection between occidental and oriental architecture and the creation of the garden, blending local and exotic species of trees and flowers. Its construction reflects on the unity of the different ethnic groups inhabiting the adjacent town of Balchik then. It also reflects on the unity of religions by its diverse buildings in different styles: from Bulgarian traditional via Muslim and Roman architecture.

(v) The cultural landscape, with its local and exotic vegetation and unity of buildings and garden forms a continuing and organically evolved landscape.

(vii) It contains areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.

3.1.c Statement of Integrity

The buildings and garden are at good condition. They are well maintained and the impact of deterioration processes is controlled.

Biological diversity and cultural diversity are closely linked in this case as the cultural landscape has been created simultaneously. The botanical garden offers conservation of biological diversity and is the most representative in the country.

3.1.d Statement of Authenticity

The buildings have remained the way they were but they are not used as a royal residency anymore and so is the garden which now is part of the Botanical Garden of the University of Sofia. However, the form and design, materials and substance, and location and settings are intact and although nowadays the property is open to visitors, it has kept its original structure both in terms of architecture and landscape planning.

3.1.e Protection and management requirements

As the property is managed by two institutions – the Ministry of Culture for the Architectural part and the University of Sofia – for the Botanical Garden, some inter-institutional tensions can occur, such as the two separate ticket offices in order to access the property by buying two tickets, one from each institution and some misunderstandings when it comes to its management are taking place. The buffer zone should also be well outlined.

3.2 Comparative Analysis

The following World Heritage sites relate to the most to the Palace and Botanical Garden in Balchik:

Cultural Landscape of Sintra
Aranjuez Cultural Landscape
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew
Palaces and Parks of Potsdam and Berlin
Muskauer Park / Park Mużakowski

However, the Palace and Botanical Garden in Balchik can be compared to the most to the Cultural Landscape of Sintra, Portugal, inscribed on the list of UNESCO in 1995 under criteria (ii), (iv) and (v). Similarities between the two nominations include the eclectics of the architectural styles and the biological diversity typical for the two sites.



2. Cactus collection in the garden with view to the sea. On the left can be noted the greenhouse.



3. The silver well.

3.3 Draft Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

The Architectural Complex the Palace with the Botanical Garden represents a cultural landscape with unique architecture – blend of occidental and oriental style buildings reflecting on the unity of the different ethnic groups inhabiting the region and their different religions as well as the unity of nature and culture in terms of the Botanical Garden with 3000 species making it the most important on the territory of the country.

4. STATE OF CONSERVATION AND FACTORS AFFECTING THE NOMINATED PROPERTY

4.a Present state of conservation

The property is in quite good condition. However, in the past one of the buildings – the smoking room – was destroyed by a land fall, that is why the shore had to be strengthened as due to undersoil water the land in this region is not very stable. After the works that took place in the 1980-s the problem is resolved and there have not been further serious threats so far.

4.b Factors affecting the nominated property

4.b (i) Development pressures and management response

Another important issue is the buffer zone which due the acquisition of land from the sea has expanded and the construction of a hotel

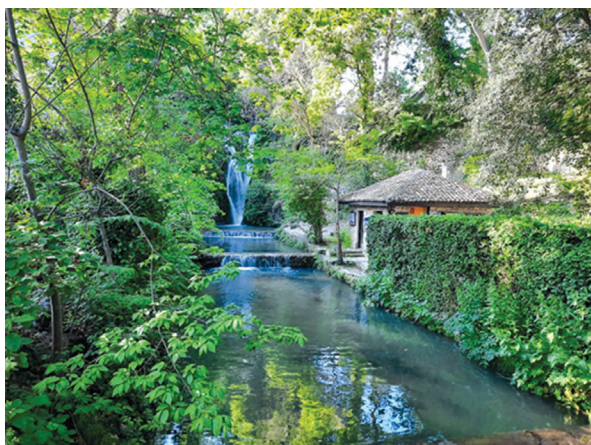
near the complex has been allowed which is quite close to the property and can affect the integrity of the cultural landscape's buffer zone. While in the 1990-s there was no construction near the site, in 2008 nearby the fallen smoking room a hotel was built that does not fit to the architecture style of the Palace and is too close to it. Automobiles of the hotel guests are also allowed to circulate in the supposedly pedestrian lane by the sea which also produces negative effect on the visitors and tourists at the beach.

4.b (ii) Environmental pressures, natural disasters and risk preparedness

Humidity, wind and change of temperatures are among the main factors that influence both buildings and garden. With the climate change the weather becomes more unstable and the natural disasters such as storms and floods, as well as droughts become more frequent. The storm from September 1997 was when the water took away a small bridge at the garden and some plants and trees were also damaged as well as the pavement in certain parts. Recently droughts are more common that can be noted as most of the springs are dry now and many canals in the garden hardly have some water. The drinking water fountains are also dried out.

4.b (iii) Visitation, other human activities and sustainable use

Since Bulgaria has joined the EU the number of Romanian tourists visiting the place has increased significantly throughout the last 20 years. In 2023 there have been 175 803 tourists from 44 countries



4. The waterfall from the bridge of the sights.



5. Nymphaeum.

visiting the site, the largest number of visitors are from Romania – 95 021 adults and 4 849 children, then the Bulgarian tourists, around 50 000, 35 783 adults and 15 439 children. There were tourists from far places such as Thailand, Vietnam, Canada, China, Japan, Korea, USA and others. The increase of the incomes is 35 %, compared to 2022.² 159 events were organized, of which 95 cultural and 64 special – weddings and baptisms. In 2024 was be a 100 anniversary of the establishment of the Palace and even more cultural events took place.

However, due to the fact that the garden is relatively large and there are various routes, tourist impact has not been an issue so far. The space acquired from the sea which is a beach now is also used for concerts, opera and theatre performances in the summer as an openair stage and so is the space at the Roman Bath-Nymphaeum. There is a stone hall too for indoors events such as classical music concerts, theatre performances or book presentations on a smaller scale as the space is not as big as the open-air stage at the beach. In the summer months outdoor activities are more popular and pleasant as the location between the sea shore and the Palace is really beautiful and attracts more visitors.

5. PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE NOMINATED PROPERTY

The Palace is a designated archaeological and constructional monument of culture and a monument of the gardening and landscape art,

declared by Statute No 09-128 of the Ministry of Culture, dated 18 April 2002.

The Botanical Garden was declared protected area in 2005 under the legislation for protected territories. It is also a national hub for rare and threatened species.

The property is part of the list of 100 sites of national importance under number 24 and 24 a) for the Palace and the Botanical Garden respectively.

As the architectural complex is managed by the Ministry of Culture and the Botanical Garden by the University of Sofia, there are sometimes difficulties in the establishment of common rules, for this reason since 2002 there are two separate ticket offices so tourists have to queue twice in order to get access to the property. The buffer zone, on the other hand is managed by the local municipality of the town of Balchik, which often due to lack of funding is willing to sell state property to private owners and as a result a hotel was constructed near the palace which can influence in a negative way its aesthetic value.

5.h Visitor facilities and infrastructure

The site is accessible for disabled people up to certain point. There are three parking lots at the three main entrances of the property. Services such as toilets are available both in specific buildings which open with the bar code from the ticket for the architectural part and there are some chemical toilets as well. In terms of facilities, there are informative plans

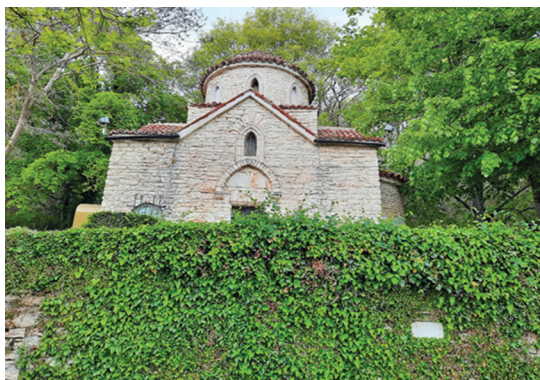
² https://bgtourism.bg/novini-balchik-nad-175-000-turisti.../ 08/01/2024



6. Rose garden with water canal.



7. French garden.



8. Chapel.



9. The Palace, 'Quiet Nest'.

of the site at its entrance and on the ticket from the botanical garden, also information about the botanical species is available in the garden. There is information about the buildings as well in Bulgarian, English and Romanian language and there are some temporary exhibitions in some of the buildings, related to art, history, etc. There is a restaurant in one of the buildings and some of the villas can be rented for overnight stays. Many weddings take place at the space where the Roman bath and the nearby Chapel are especially in the summer period. Some open-air exhibitions are also taking place in the summer as well as a theatre and an art festival in September called Via Pontica and other cultural events.

5.j Staffing levels and expertise (professional, technical, maintenance)

Mostly maintenance personnel for the garden are necessary on an everyday basis as well as people working at the ticket counters who are able to communicate in foreign languages so that to explain the existence of two ticket offices. Maintenance of the Botanical Garden in the summer months is quite requiring as plants need watering almost every day due to the hot weather.

CONCLUSION

The proposal for nomination of the Palace and Botanical Garden of Balchik is feasible. The country has not inscribed cultural property since 1986 and there are no properties of mixed type or cultural landscape on the list of UNESCO for Bulgaria so including the Palace and Botanical Garden of Balchik in the tentative list of the country would be an asset. Perhaps the proposal can be extended to a serial and transboundary nomination with Romania, including some of the Palaces related to Regina Maria there as well, such as Pelisor or Bran castle. However, this article can be used as a solid basis for further nomination of the proposed site. This would also help for the better preservation and management of the property by establishing management plan and all the necessary requirements for a possible candidature and its monitoring.



10. View of the Palace from the 'pedestrian' lane and the beach with the hotel at the bottom.

6. DOCUMENTATION

6.a Photographs and audiovisual image inventory and authorization form

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**Архитектурно-парков комплекс
Дворецът и Ботаническата градина в Балчик –
една възможна номинация за културен пейзаж
в списъка на ЮНЕСКО**

Елица Божкова

Изследването представлява предложение за вписването на архитектурно-парковия комплекс Двореца с Ботаническата градина в Балчик като културен пейзаж в списъка на ЮНЕСКО. Базира се на ръководните насоки за изпълнение на конвенцията за световно наследство. Включва идентификацията на номинирания обект, неговото описание и характеристиките на вписването с критерии, сравнителен анализ и предложение за изключителна световна ценност. Разгледани са състоянието на обекта и факторите, оказващи влияние на номинацията, както и опазването и управлението на номинирания обект. Изследването може да послужи като основа за предложение за представителната листа като културен пейзаж за България, тъй като страната досега няма вписвания по тази категория в листата за световно наследство.

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ПРОГРАМА
НАУЧНИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ,
ИНОВАЦИИ И ДИГИТАЛИЗАЦИЯ ЗА
ИНТЕЛИГЕНТНА ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ