

BULGARIA

The Buzludzha Monument¹

History

The Buzludzha monument is one of the most iconic and significant buildings of post-war modernism in Bulgaria and in Europe. It is located in the Central Balkans on a historically significant mountain peak with an altitude of 1432 metres. Its purpose was to celebrate the history of Bulgarian socialism. Buzludzha was financed with public donations – with the intent that it would become a nationwide cause. The project took more than seven years, starting in 1974, and over 6000 people worked on the monument, including Bulgaria's finest architects, artists, sculptors and engineers.

The building was opened in 1981 and during the monument's eight years of use, it was visited by more than two million people and served as a political museum and ceremonial venue. After the political changes in 1989, the new democratic government had no interest in maintaining the most significant symbol of the previous ideology. The following three decades of looting, vandalism and neglect have left it in its present deteriorated condition.

Social significance

Similar is the destiny of several hundred smaller monuments built during the socialist regime in Bulgaria and the entire former Eastern Bloc. The common young heritage in the post-socialist countries is often traumatic or unfamiliar to the broad public. This leads to the destruction of great human tangible achievements. They are witnesses of a period that is not discussed, taught, or remembered by museums and schoolbooks in Bulgaria. This lack of open discussion and education regarding communism allows for speculation, political manipulation and deep social polarisation. Buzludzha as the most iconic and controversial artefact of Bulgaria's socialist era can become an example for the rational reassessment and preservation of Bulgaria's and Eastern Europe's difficult heritage.

Artistic significance

In addition to its unique architecture and dynamic engineering, it contains a real gem of 910 square meters of precious mosaics, which make it also one of the largest mosaic artworks in Europe.



Fig. 1: View of the Buzludzha monument today (photo Les Johnstone)



Figs. 2 and 3: Impressions of the damaged interior (photos Nicola Miller and Dora Ivanova)

“While the architecture provokes and inspires emotions, the mosaics tell stories”, explained the architect of the monument, Georgi Stoilov. The revival of mosaic art on and in functional modernist architecture is one of the most prominent features and important achievements of so-called East Modernism (Socialist Modernism). It was widely used, not only in governmental buildings, but also in apartment buildings, kindergartens, schools, hospitals, railway stations, airports, stadiums, theatres, and museums. These mosaics were designed to inspire, instill virtue, and impart collective community values. They are undoubtedly the representative form of art for the generation born after the Second World War. The fine art of the Buzludzha Monument is the most valuable and at the same time the most vulnerable element in the building.

First steps of reassessment

In the last years the monument has increasingly gained international popularity. It was featured by media such as BBC, Discovery Channel, National Geographic, CNN, Reuters, and many more. Because of increased interest and illegal tourism, since April 2018 the regional administration of Stara Zagora has organised a round-the-clock security police at the monument. This measure has stopped people going inside the monument, thus preventing vandalism and accidents. Moreover, the listing process for a National Heritage Site designation has also been initiated and is in progress.

In 2018, the Buzludzha Monument became one of the “7 Most Endangered” heritage sites in Europe, a programme run by Europa Nostra and the European Investment Bank Institute. The result was an expert mission and a technical report recommending feasibility studies and urgent measures to be implemented as soon as possible.

Conservation and management plan

Because of its significance and due to the quality of the proposed project, in 2019 the Buzludzha Monument was awarded a 185,000 US dollar grant by the Getty Foundation within the “Keeping it Modern Program”. Thanks to this grant a detailed Conservation and Management Plan (CMP) is being created. An international team of experts started the project in August 2019 and plan to complete it in September 2020 with a public report. The project partners are ICOMOS Bulgaria and ICOMOS Germany, the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG) in Sofia, the Technical University of Munich, and the Buzludzha Project Foundation with Dora Ivanova as on-site-manager.

The Getty project, which is still in progress (until autumn 2020) at the time of writing this report, includes the creation of a database through archive digitisation, three-dimensional laser scanning and model representation for mapping damages and measures. The result is a detailed state-of-conservation report, including restoration and financing proposals for the static-constructive consolidation of the building and for ensuring the preservation of the original surfaces. In addition, revitalisation proposals for a conversion of the disused property are to be made, a business and marketing concept is to be developed and acutely necessary emergency safety measures are to be pointed out to prevent further damage and loss of the mosaics due to weather and vandalism.

The restoration and revitalisation of the Buzludzha Monument require highly qualified conservation measures and extensive investments in the coming years as well as sustainable development and utilisation perspectives in the long run.

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Footnote

¹ The Buzludzha Monument was already introduced in *Heritage at Risk 2014–2015* (published in 2017), pp. 32 ff. under the

chapter heading “Buzludzha. Forbidden History of a Neglected Masterpiece”.