

REVIEW

by Prof. Vera Boneva, ScD (History and Museology), State University of Library Studies and IT,
of the doctoral dissertation of Vessela Gheorghieva
“Digitalization as a factor in the development of Bulgarian museums”,
Professional field 3.5. “Social communications and information sciences”,
academic supervision by Prof. Ivanka Mavrodieva, Doc. Hab.

Information on the candidate and the procedure

Vessela Gheorghieva finished the SS. Cyril and Methodius Humanitarian Gymnasium in Kazanluk. She graduated from St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, majoring in Philosophy, and earning a BA and MA. From 2010 to 2014 she took a course in Library Studies and IT. In 2019 she earned a master’s degree in *Management and socialization of the cultural heritage*. From 2020 to 2024 she has been a doctoral student at the Chair of Library Studies, Academic Information and Cultural Policy in the Doctoral Program *Information Search Systems*.

The documents submitted show that the candidate has achieved the goals of her individual plan and completed in time all the necessary activities. The dissertation has been finished and discussed by the Chair members on January 21, 2024. The academic supervisor prof. Mavrodieva, Doc. Hab., has given a positive opinion of the dissertation in her special report and recommended its submittal for defense to the academic panel. A plagiarism test by special software has revealed that coincidental congruencies with other texts are at subliminal levels for the four basic coefficients.

My own observations have also convinced me of the authenticity of the text and the lack therein of inappropriately used others' research effort. The candidate has submitted *three academic papers*, printed in refereed academic publications. All this gives me ground for accepting that the all the requirements for a go-ahead of the defense of the thesis have been met.

In my capacity of member of the academic panel I have received everything requisite for the procedure. That includes the Abstract, which does indeed summarize the main points of the text and includes Gheorghieva's self assessment of the contributive moments in her work. I also declare hereby that I don't have any co-authorships or other activities in common with the candidate that could result in a conflict of interest.

General information on the disseration

The structure of the thesis is classical for the *genre*: Introduction, three Chapters, Conclusion, List of sources (164 *in toto*), and Appendices. The text comprises 251 pp, appendices included. The author has devised a user-friendly List of figures in the text (49 of them), plus a Dictionary of the terms used.

The reference system used follows the requirements. Quoting is correct. The chosen theoretical framework is adequate. The author demonstrates excellent knowledge of the normative basis of museum work in Bulgaria and throughout Europe. Quantitative data are processed correctly, with the goal of achieving simultaneously representativeness and exhaustiveness. While it is hard to achieve both effects with info gathered from museums, data obtained from the National

Statistical Institute are systematized in a way that provides the research with a wider context.

The paper is well-written and conveys the intelligence of the author. There is some tendency to present a rather rich array of definitions of phenomena pertaining to the applications of museum work, but it is balanced by original critical appraisals, following the logic of the discourse in question. The poll questionnaire is well thought-out and well structured. The poll itself, accounted for in Chapter III, leads to conclusions which in general do correspond to reality.

Main text analysis

In the Introduction it is explained why the topic is of interest, and what is the subject matter and methodology of the work. A leading hypothesis re the importance of digitalization in museum work is formulated. That hypothesis is relevant, albeit somewhat too general. The chronological bracket of the research is concrete and well-grounded. On the one hand it is tied to the Covid-19 crisis; on the other hand, to the latest post-industrial innovations, which have transformed digitalization from a tool into a factor of social life and culture production in its own right.

In Chapter I, Gheorghieva has enumerated and defined her main operative notions, centering on the understanding of the museum as a reality in culture. Her approach may be termed legalistic, as she bases her thinking on the definitions, adopted in the Cultural Heritage Law and the Statute of ICOM, which is acceptable and effective. The typology of museums is also structured following the criteria given in the normative framework, and results in a successful attempt at drawing

a picture of the current museum network in this country. I believe the effort of the author in this part to be indeed productive and original, as there is no register of museums in Bulgaria, despite the fact that it is mandatory under the Cultural Heritage Law. That lack of basic information is an objective obstacle to the work of every museologist and of many administrators, and the problem is encountered periodically, though we live in the age of lists and open databases. The functions of museums are described comprehensively, with natural accentuation on preservation of cultural assets, exposition work, touristic resources and digitalization.

In Chapter II, data and developments pertaining to digitalization are systematized. The definitions adopted work well in the chosen area of interest, tracing the logic of the digitalization processes of movable cultural assets in the institutions of memory, as well as the metadata about them. To an extent peripheral remains the problematique of digitalization of immovable cultural assets which are part of the museum structures, i.e., historic buildings housing the museums, archeological sites, ethnographic complexes, etc.

The role of digitalization is addressed in facilitating access to the cultural goods of this country, as well as in the realization of enjoyment as a basic function of museums. Digitalization is seen as ensuring the opportunity for virtual museum tours and exhibituions, the use of QR codes and what is known as *gamification*.

The pertinent national and European legal framework is covered exhaustively. Priority is given to the *Digital Europe* and *Digital Bulgaria 2025* programs. Part of the governmental measures promoting digitalization in cultural development is mentioned.

Digitalization technology is described briefly, but clearly. The problem of digitalization software is tied to the cultural heritage profile and the legal framework of ICOM. Stages of digitalization are theoretically characterized; however, their evolving impact on museum development is not concretized enough. The problem of formulating the parameters for the specific museum software and for its realization is not discussed in sufficient depth. Besides, the digitalization activities in running a museum from the administrative, financial and logistic perspectives should have been elucidated. It should be noted that objectively, digitalization in running museums in many cases has overpassed the digitalization of museum collections.

The factual state and parameters of museum digitalization processes are depicted against the backdrop of data from NEMO, according to which about 20% of museum collections in Europe are partially or fully accessible online. This is the result not only of national effort, but also of all-European programs and products like the digital platform *Europeana*. Vessela Gheorghieva draws attention to good practices and focuses on the main problem here: the lack of a unified national software to achieve a digitalization transformation of the cultural heritage in museums. The situation to date, as correctly described by Gheorghieva, entails various problems, including some in the selection of the metadata that are to be digitalized. The author has good reasons to also highlight the lack of a national methodology for museum digitalization. It is known that methodological instructions of this kind were produced for archives and libraries nationwide years ago, which is the reason why these institutions are digitalizing relatively rapidly.

In the concluding paragraphs of Chapter II the author is correct to underline the role of state structures – I would name the Ministry of Culture – for producing a unified software for museum digitalization, as well as a national methodology and standards.

In Chapter III there is an analysis of the data from a survey of the administrative and technological aspects of digitalization in Bulgarian museums. There is an account of the way the questionnaire was designed, of the fieldwork, and of some difficulties in its realization. The conditions of the mandatory Internet sites of the museums has also been researched. The sites' condition is mostly just narrated rather than analyzed, yet it contains interesting observations.

The candidate has been able to receive 52 filled-in questionnaires, which is a relatively big sample. She has also supplied a list of museums which have not responded or declined to participate in the survey.

Five clusters of questions were established, and answers were processed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results from most of the groups are presented in graphic form. They give a good basis for assessment of the situation, mostly seen from the subjective viewpoint of the museum employees. The objective processes are harder to discern, as digitalization is being realized with different methods having different priorities, and a precise mapping of results is quasi-impossible by standard survey methods.

Despite such objective difficulties, Gheorghieva has diligently registered and summarized important aspects of the researched process. Tendencies revealed by the survey are on the whole encouraging. It becomes clear that museum teams

have an awareness that digitalization is an important priority in their work and are working steadily for its implementation. One can see that a wide range of activities have been already digitalized, from routine admin procedures to prestigious products on display. The author comes to the important conclusion that contemporary experts in memory institutions are clear about the fact that the public today should be attracted not only through classical activities and expositions, but also via enticing digitalized products. In that context digital communication with actual and potential museum visitors is unquestionably a constant priority. Financial aspects of digitalization are also clarified via the survey; I think that they are of secondary importance to personnel and administrative problems. Replying to the general question on the significance of digitalization (p 158), most respondents see it as a prerequisite for widening of the museum audience, rather than as a key activity in preservation and research of cultural assets.

Data on the participation of museums in the social media are comprehensive enough; what are the goals of museums in this dynamic communicative field is also elucidated. In this part, as well as in the analysis of sites, it would have been good to illustrate by significant cases, evaluated by the author in terms of quality of the publication, as well as of feedback data.

Vessela Gheorghieva's conclusions for each cluster of questions are adequately drawn from the data and well formulated. They buttress the opinion that more systematic and effective policies should be implemented not only by the museums, butb also by their principals, such as municipalities, central administration institutions and, first and foremost, the Ministry of Culture. The

author's findings re poor technical equipment, personnel and financial deficits are also serious, but are somewhat easier to overcome. It is significant that there are museums which have resolved such problems, despite the fact that they function in the same environment as the rest.

Evaluation of the contributions and critical remarks

The self-evaluation of contributions reflects truly the work done. The author has sought and in part found a way for museum digitalization development to continue within the existing legal framework. There are relevant paragraphs on the role of digitalization for the preservation of existing cultural assets, as well as for popularizing museum appreciation. The methodology for the survey, created by the candidate, is a contribution too.

Besides the few critical remarks above, I would like to point out that the text lacks a compact and consistent description of all the components of the digitalization process, as it happens in the reality in Bulgarian museums. There are but a few data on concrete results, e.g. on the number of digitalized artefacts, on the metadata, on the products for communication with audiences, digital expositional components, research resources, etc. There are no examples of bad practices, which, regrettably, are not few. The survey findings point to concrete problems, yet the recommendations for their resolution are not concrete enough. There are some repetitions of the definitions in the main text and the definitions in the appended dictionary. A serious shortcoming is the fact that the author has not used the most recent dictionary of museology, published last year as part of the

academic work of ICOM, namely *Dictionary of Museology*, edited By François Mairesse, Routledge 2023.

Conclusion

The work of Vessela Gheorghieva fulfils all the main requirements for a doctoral dissertation in professional field 3.5. Social communications and information sciences. It is presented in a text written well and competently. The author has demonstrated the punctuality and depth of a researcher. The analytical model is reliable, well structured, and yields results.

Considering all of the above, I hereby vote with a **“YES”** in the procedure for awarding a doctoral degree in Professional direction “Social communications and information sciences” to Vessela Gheorghieva on the basis of the submitted dissertation entitled “Digitalization as a factor in the development of Bulgarian museums”.

Prof. Vera Boneva, ScD (History and Museology)

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Translator Deyan Kyuranov