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ECHOES OF EMPIRE, CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: A TRANSNATIONAL PATH TO PRESERVING MATEIČ (THE BLACK MOUNTAIN MONASTERY)*

JASMINA S. ĆIRIĆ**

A b s t r a c t. – The Black Mountain Monastery (Mateič), located near Kumanovo in the Republic of North Macedonia, holds profound historical, religious, and artistic significance as a legacy of the Nemanjić dynasty. Restored during the reign of Tzar Stefan Dušan, the monastery is renowned for its frescoes and architectural style, which blend Serbian and Byzantine traditions. This article explores the monastery's potential for transnational nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List, emphasizing its cultural importance to both Serbia and North Macedonia. Through a collaborative nomination process, this initiative seeks to safeguard the monastery's preservation while fostering international cooperation in heritage management. The article also discusses the challenges in maintaining and conserving the site, as well as the broader implications of transnational cultural heritage protection in the Balkans.

Keywords: Black Mountain Monastery, Mateič, Nemanjić dynasty, UNESCO World Heritage, transnational nomination, cultural heritage, Serbia, North Macedonia

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We have the right to consider the cultural heritage of the whole world as our own property. But this affection we feel for everything good and beautiful that man has done in the past also involves responsibilities, and for this reason essential problems relating to the safeguarding of historical monuments must be dealt with on an international level. The notion of “society” will then become the notion of the whole of human society.

Đurđe Bošković

“Opening Speech”, *Symposium on Monuments and Society*,
Leningrad, USSR, 2 September 1969

1. INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLACK MOUNTAIN MONASTERY

The concept of a global “human society” bearing the responsibility for safeguarding historical monuments, as eloquently articulated by Đurđe Bošković in 1969, finds a powerful contemporary echo in the urgent need to protect the Black Mountain Monastery (Mateič). Situated near Kumanovo in the Republic of North Macedonia, this site is not merely a local landmark but a monument of profound historical, artistic, and theological significance, deeply intertwined with the legacy of the Nemanjić dynasty (Figure 1). Its potential for a transnational nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List highlights the imperative for international cooperation in preserving such culturally rich and historically layered sites. Originally established during the reign of Isaac Comnenus (r. 1057–1059), the monastery underwent significant restoration and artistic development in the 14th century under the patronage of Serbian Tzar Stefan Dušan (r. 1331–1355) (Figure 2). These layered historical strata makes the site a rare witness to the overlapping spheres of Byzantine and Serbian medieval culture.¹

1 Николај Л. Окуњев, Граѓа за историју српске уметности. 2. Црква свете Богородице – Матеич, *Гласник Скопској научној друштва 7–8* (1930), стр. 89–113; Коста Балабанов, Антоние Николовски, Димитар Корнаков, *Сѝоменици на културата на Македонија*, Скопје: Мисла, 1980, стр. 82–83; Елизабета Димитрова, *Манасѝир Матејче*, Скопје: Каламус, 2002; Елизабета Димитрова, On the New Dating of the Fresco Ensemble of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Matejče, *Balkanoslavica 30/31* (2002), pp. 95–100.

The name Mateič / Matejče originates from the Serbian word “Mati,” meaning “Mother,” which refers to the Mother of God. Маја Јакимовска Тошиќ, Поглед врз историското минато на манастирот “Св. Богородица” – Матејче, *Корени : сѝисание за лиѝераѝура, кулѝура, ѝраѓански ѝрашања и наука = Rrënjët : revistë për literaturë, kulturë për çështje e qytetare dhe shkenc = Корени : часоѝис за лиѝераѝуру, кулѝуру, ѝраѓанска ѝиѝања и науку = Darhia : patrin e literaturaki, kulturaki, dizutne pushhiba*

The monastery stands as a testament to the religious and artistic aspirations of both the Byzantine and the medieval Serbian state, particularly under the Nemanjić dynasty. Its rich fresco program and architectural layout reflect not only local monastic tradition but also a broader Orthodox Christian worldview that transcends national borders (Figure 3).²

However, the monastery is currently endangered due to structural decay, insufficient conservation measures, and the socio-political instability that followed the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia.³ These challenges have significantly hindered its preservation, placing it at serious risk of further deterioration. In this context, the monastery emerges as a strong candidate for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List through a transnational nomination – a move that could provide both legal protection and a framework for bilateral cooperation.

This paper explores the potential of the Black Mountain Monastery to be inscribed as a transnational World Heritage List, examining the historical foundations of the site, the artistic and theological significance of its preserved elements, and the modern challenges facing its conservation (Figure 4). By addressing these issues, the article seeks to contribute to broader discussions about heritage management across borders, and the role of international mechanisms in safeguarding culturally complex and historically layered monuments.

2. FROM KOMNENIAN FOUNDATIONS TO NEMANJIĆ ARCHITECTURAL REINSCRIPTION

The Black Mountain monastery church (Mateič) occupies a liminal position within the historical continuum of Orthodox monasticism in the Balkans. As part of the Komnenian monastic network, Mateič originally functioned within the spiritual

thaj nauka = Zārtsinji : fimildā ti literaturā, culturā, antribār-ā-bānatorlor shi shtintsā = Kökler : edebyjat kültür, vatandaş, haklari ve bilim dergisi = Roots : review for literature, culture, civil affairs and science i.2, δp.5 (2003), ctp. 649–664.

- 2 Jasmina S. Ćirić, Mateič Monastery: a Place of Cultural Memory in Urgent Need of Conservation, *Niš & Byzantium*, 21 (2023), pp. 305–322. On all historiographical issues and the detours that lasted almost a century in the article: Jasmina S. Ćirić, Branislav Cv etković, Empress Helena in Athos, Mateič, and Serres: from Shared Power to Personal Reign, *Women and Power in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Southeast and Central Europe (1300-1600)*, ed. Melina Rokai, Budapest: Trivent 2025, pp. 75–113.
- 3 Lazar Sumanov, Macedonia: Matejce Mission Provisional Report, *Heritage at Risk: Patrimoine en Peril / Patrimonio en Peligro: Icomos World Report 2001/2002 On Monuments And Sites In Danger*, eds. D. Bumbaru, S. Burke. J. Harrington. M. Petzet, J. Ziesemer, München: K. G. Saur 2001, pp. 133–135; International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), *Fact Finding Mission to Macedonia*, 28 May 2002, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/factfinding/ihf/2002/en/45951> / (accessed on 25 April 2025).

and architectural framework of the Byzantine oikoumene, inscribing the Orthodox presence into the mountainous terrain of what is now North Macedonia.⁴

This early Byzantine stratum, however, was later transformed during the reign of Tzar Stefan Dušan in the 14th century, a moment when Serbian imperial ideology sought to articulate itself through monumental patronage. Dušan's deliberate appropriation and restoration of Mateič – carried out in tandem with his consort, Empress Helena (Figure 5) – served not merely to refurbish a dilapidated sanctuary, but to inscribe Serbian political and spiritual sovereignty into a space saturated with Byzantine legacy. The project formed part of a broader strategy in which monastic foundations operated as *loci* of dynastic commemoration, liturgical continuity, and symbolic domination (Figures 6, 7).⁵

This ideological reorientation was materially encoded in the very fabric of the monastery. A key architectural device – shared by Mateič and the church of Staro Nagoričino, a major endowment of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321) – is the bipartite division of masonry: the use of stone in the lower structural zones, and brick in the upper sections. In Staro Nagoričino, this configuration reflects an earlier phase of construction and a preference for compositional stability.⁶ At Mateič, however, the use of heavy stone at the base conveys a deliberate allusion to permanence and tradition, while the upper sections in elaborately patterned brickwork announce a stylistic shift. This ornamental flourish, particularly evident around windows and the dome, suggests an intention not only to beautify but to

4 The existence of an earlier church dedicated to the Virgin of the Black Mountain is attested in the charter issued by King Milutin in 1300 for the Monastery of St. George the Gorgos. Vladimir Mošin, Sima Ćirković, Dušan Sindik, *Zbornik srednjovekovnih ćirilćkih povelja i pisama Srbije, Bosne i Dubrovnika. Knjiga I, 1186–1321*, Beograd: Istorijski institut, 2011, 321 (64), no. 92.

5 Of great importance for understanding the appearance of the church in Mateič are two articles: Александар Дероко, Матејча, *Ѕтаринар, ѿрећа серуја, VIII–IX / 1933–1934* (1934), стр. 84–89; Ђурђе Бошковић, Срушена је и стара капела у Матејићу, *Ѕтаринар, ѿрећа серуја, XIV* (1939), стр. 153–157. In the legacy of Ђурђе Бошковић, there are photographs mentioned in his text (the state of the chapel before its demolition, as well as plan sketches (Figures 6, 7). The appearance of the chapel is visible only in the photographs taken by Vladimir R. Petković. These images are preserved in the National Museum in Belgrade. Dubravka Preradović, *U ime nauke i domovine. Istraživanja srednjovekovnih spomenika pod okriljem Narodnog muzeja Srbije i njihovi rezultati (1906–1940)*, Beograd: Narodni muzej Srbije, 2023, стр. 86.

Generally for the architecture of Mateič cf. Војислав Кораћ, Марица Шупут, *Архитектура византијској светиа*, Beograd: Народна књига – Византолошки институт – Филозофски факултет, 1998, стр. 342–344, сл. 486–487; Војислав Кораћ, *Ѕюменици монументалне српске архитектуре XIV века у Повардарју*, Beograd: САНУ – РЗЗСК, 2003, стр. 212–242.

6 Georges Bošković, Deux eglises de Milutin: Staro Nagoričino et Gračanica, *L'art byzantin chez les Slaves. Les Balkans, Premier recueil dédié à la mémoire de Théodore Uspenskij*, Paris: P. Geuthner 1930, pp. 197–206; Б. Тодић, *Ѕтаро Најорћино*, Beograd: Републички завод за заштиту споменика културе : Просвета : САНУ, 1993, стр. 127–138.

distinguish Dušan's architectural idiom from that of his predecessors (Figure 8).⁷

The contrast becomes even more pronounced in the articulation of façades and fenestration. Staro Nagoričino exhibits a restrained symmetry: small, evenly spaced windows and niches that emphasize sobriety and structural clarity, hallmarks of Milutin's ecclesiastical commissions. Mateič, in contrast, breaks from this measured rhythm through a more dynamic and vertical façade composition. Larger windows, placed higher along the lateral and rear walls, draw the viewer's gaze upward and flood the interior with light, thereby enhancing the transcendental atmosphere of the liturgical space. This manipulation of form and illumination speaks directly to Dušan's desire to elevate his imperial image not only in political terms but in the spiritual imagination of the Orthodox world.⁸

A particularly significant architectural element is the monumental triumphal arch situated in the western part of the naos (Figure 9). Its presence signals an intensified ceremonial axis and introduces a note of imperial grandeur within the monastic context.⁹ This spatial gesture – distinct from the more subdued articulation of earlier Serbian churches – can be interpreted as a theological and political metaphor, aligning Dušan's temporal rule with the triumph of Orthodoxy and the eschatological promise of divine order.¹⁰

7 Војислав Кораћ, *о. с.*, 231. It is notable that S. Ćurčić made a relatively similar observation stating that Mateič as “five-domed church, obviously relies on the tradition of five-domed churches initiated in Serbia by Dušan's grandfather, King Milutin,” cf. Slobodan Ćurčić, *Articulation of Church Facades during the first half of the Fourteenth century: A study in the relationship of Byzantine and Serbian Architecture*, *Vizantijska umetnost početkom XIV veka*, ed. Sreten Petković, Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, 1978, p. 23.

8 Slobodan Ćurčić, *о.с.*, 17–27; Georgios Velenis, *Building Techniques and External Decoration During the 14th Century in Macedonia*, *L'art de Thessalonique et des pays balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XIVe siècle*, ed. R. Samardžić, Belgrade: Institut des Études balkaniques ASSA, 1987, pp. 95–105; Slobodan Ćurčić, *The Role of Late Byzantine Thessaloniki in Church Architecture in the Balkans*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 57 (2003), pp. 65–84.

9 Applied to the space of a medieval church. cf. Georgi Gerov, *The iconography of the liminality: the symbolical vertical in the sacred space of the church entrance*, *Ierotopija: issledovanie sakral'nykh prostranstv. Materialy meždunarodnogo simpoziuma*, ed. A. M. Lidov, Moskva: Arthistoricum.net, 2004, pp. 110–111; Idem, *The Narthex as Desert: The Symbolism of the Entrance Space in Orthodox Church Buildings*, *Ritual and Art: Byzantine essays for Christopher Walter*, ed. P. Armstrong, London: Pindar Press, 2006, pp. 144–159.

10 Војислав Кораћ, *Споменици монументалне српске архитектуре XIV века у Повардарју*, Beograd: САНУ, Посебна издања, књига DCLIV, Одељење историјских наука књига 26 — Републички завод за заштиту споменика културе, Споменици српске архитектуре средњег века, 2003, стр. 219, 239, 247; Јасмина С. Ћирић, *Четири српске средњовековне цркве у околини Скопља: архитектура и проблеми очувања културног наслеђа*, *Гласник: Службени лист Српске Православне Цркве, Година С, број 6* (2020), стр. 309–316. On the issues of the architectural influence of St. George in Staro Nagoričino to Mateič Monastery in the articles in press: Jasmina S. Ćirić, *The Glittering Interior: Mimicking Marble and the Aesthetics of Devotion in the Mateič Monastery*, *Sparkle, Glitter, Gleam, Glow: Reflective/Refractive Optical Mediums and Effects in Art*, ed. Elizabeth Howie, Brill, 2025 (forthcoming); Jasmina S. Ćirić, *Church of the Virgin of the Black Mountain (Mateič): Monument to Tsar*

In this sense, Mateič emerges as more than a restored sanctuary: it becomes a palimpsest of transimperial memory and dynastic ambition. While its foundations remain Byzantine, its 14th-century reinvention under Tzar Stefan Dušan asserts a new narrative – one that seeks not only to emulate but to surpass. The monastery thus functions simultaneously as a site of continuity and rupture, embodying the cultural synthesis of Byzantine and Nemanjić visions of sacred space.

The convergence of political, liturgical, and visual languages within its design reflects the broader Orthodox conception of sacral kingship, in which the legitimacy of imperial power was inextricably tied to divine sanction and its architectural expression.¹¹

3. FROM DESTRUCTION TO DIPLOMACY: COMPLEX FATE OF MATEIČ MONASTERY

The Black Mountain monastery church (Mateič) provides a particularly instructive case in understanding the complex intersection of post-conflict heritage politics, identity, and reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans. Despite periodic restoration work,¹² the monastery's fortunes declined over time. Today, the monastery suffers from both environmental factors and political events; it was abandoned by its monks following the church schism of 1967.¹³

Dušan's Byzantinisms in the mid XIV Century, *Science Journal of Volgograd State University*, 2025 (forthcoming).

- 11 It is noteworthy that this assessment was already made by Aleksandar Deroko; however, it appears to have been largely overlooked in scholarly literature in the decades that followed. In the conclusion of his text, Deroko wrote: „Црквена грађевина манастира ‘Матејче’ спада размерама својим у наше највеће старе споменике, то пак не чини сву вредност њену. Оно што чини да се ‘Матејча’ може рачунати и међу најзначајније споменике, то је њена монументалност. Та монументалност долази отуда што спољашњост делује импозантно, крупним и мирним и тешким масама без виткости, декоративности и живописности — а што је унутрањи волумен црквене просторије простран, прегледан и добро осветљен. Ове особине немају баш многи наши стари споменици. У унутрашњости се сачувао живопис из XIV века.” [“The church building of the Mateič Monastery ranks, in terms of its dimensions, among the largest of our old monuments, but this alone does not constitute its full value. What places ‘Mateič’ among the most significant monuments is its monumentality. This monumentality stems from the fact that the exterior appears imposing, with large, calm, and heavy masses lacking slenderness, ornamentation, and vividness — while the interior volume of the church space is spacious, clear, and well lit. These qualities are not shared by many of our old monuments. The interior preserves frescoes dating from the 14th century.”, *transl. J. S. Ćirić*]. Александар Дероко, Матејча, *Старинар, њрећа серија, VIII-IX / 1933–1934* (1934), стр. 89.
- 12 Јасмина Зисовска, Црквата Св. Богородица манастир Матејче, *Беседа : сѝисание за кулѝура и уметносѝ Год. 15, бр. 42* (1988), стр. 64–72.
- 13 The following sources provide different insights into the historical and political context

Historically tied to 14th century historical period, Mateič has witnessed repeated episodes of degradation, particularly in the post-Yugoslav period, when ethno-national tensions across the region significantly impacted the cultural landscape.

Following the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia¹⁴ and within a broader atmosphere of interethnic tensions, a series of acts were committed that targeted medieval heritage in the region. In the case of Mateič, these acts included the desecration of the church space, removal of sacred liturgical items, destruction of frescoes, and the use of the monastery grounds for purposes entirely incompatible with its sanctity (Figure 10). Notably, the church was used as a dormitory by armed forces, food was prepared in the altar area, and the cemetery was desecrated, with bones scattered and a cross destroyed.¹⁵ These acts were

of the schism in the Macedonian Orthodox Church: Славко Димевски, *Историја на Македонската Православна Црква*, Скопје: Култура, 1989; Jure Zečević Božić, *Autokcephalieerklärung der Makedonischen Orthodoxen Kirche*, Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1994; Предраг Пузовић, *Раскол у Српској православној цркви – македонско црквено њивање*, Београд: Свети архијерејски синод СПЦ, 1997; Marko Nikolić, Duško Dimitrijević, Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) in Former Yugoslav State, *Politics and Religion Journal* 7 (2013), pp. 193–215; Ivica Čairović, The role of vicar bishop Dositej (Stojković) at the beginning of the church schism in Macedonia in 1958, *Istorija 20. veka* 36 (2018), pp. 168–180; Dragan Šljivić, Nenad Živković, Self-Ruled and Self-Consecrated Ecclesiastical Schism as a Nation-Building Instrument in the Orthodox Countries of South Eastern Europe, *For God and Country: Essays on Religion and Nationalism*, ed. P. C. Mentzel, Basel: MDPI, 2020, pp. 99–105; Диогенис Д. Валаванидис, *Истина о њивању Герману и њивање њив. Македонске цркве*, Београд: Центар за заштиту хришћанског идентитета, 2022.

- 14 The Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare (National Liberation Army) occupied the monastery, which they used as both their headquarters and arsenal, while they were operating in the country between 2000 and 2001. Irena Stawowy-Kawka, The Outbreak of the Albanian-Macedonian Armed Conflict in 2001 – the Economic Situation, *Politeja* 11 (4) (30) (2014), pp. 281–293; Andrej Krzak, Asymmetry of the Albanian-Macedonian Military Conflict in 2001: Military Characteristics of the Fight in the Regions of Tetovo, Kumanovo, Aračinovo and Vaksince, *Politeja* 11 (4) (30) (2014), pp. 295–316.
- 15 Journalist M. Stančić reported in the article “Serbs and Macedonians Have Sued Macedonia,” published in *Novosti* on January 15, 2004, that the trial initiated by displaced Serbs and Macedonians from the villages of Matejče and Opae against the Republic of North Macedonia had finally begun at the Kumanovo District Court after several delays. The plaintiffs sought compensation for both material and non-material damages, citing ongoing fear and trauma. Despite three years having passed since the end of the armed conflict in the country, hundreds of displaced individuals still lacked real assurances that they could safely return to their centuries-old homes. According to Siniša Stanković, the legal representative for the expelled Orthodox Christians and a lawyer from Kumanovo, 110 lawsuits had been filed as part of a broader case known as “Displaced Against the State,” distributed among 11 judges at the district court. The article explains that Serbs and Macedonians from Matejče, Ropaljce, Opae, and other villages were forced to flee their homes during attacks by terrorist groups and Albanian paramilitary formations, following orders from the then-state leadership. They sought refuge in collective centers around

documented by the Serbian Orthodox Church and triggered strong appeals for restitution and protection from His Holiness Patriarch Pavle and later from the Holy Synod of Bishops. A series of letters were addressed to Macedonian state authorities and ecclesiastical counterparts, urging the immediate cessation of abuse, as well as the restoration of the sacred site to its original purpose and community.¹⁶ Albanian terrorists and extremists destroyed the centuries-old presence and traces of the Orthodox culture in Mateič using dynamite, bombs, mines, tanks, and other weapons. The Macedonian Minister of Culture appealed to the UNESCO Secretary-General regarding the problems of cultural heritage during the conflict, and the ICOMOS Executive Board in Macedonia launched a campaign to save the cultural heritage threatened by armed con-

Kumanovo, and now demand that the state compensate them for their lost property, damaged health, and ongoing suffering, given the lack of any concrete measures enabling their return. Miroslav Mladenović, a representative of the Committee of Displaced Serbs and Macedonians from Matejče, emphasized that those who still hoped to return faced constant threats to their lives from local and newly settled Albanians. He stressed that, without state guarantees for their security, displaced residents had no choice but to seek legal redress for their lost homes, destroyed property, endangered lives, and deteriorated health, especially since none of the state's alternative solutions had materialized. Cf. Jasmina S. Ćirić, *Mateič Monastery: A place of Cultural Memory in Urgent need of conservation*, *Niš and Byzantium: Twenty first International Symposium, Niš, 3–5 June 2022*, ed. M. Rakocija, Niš: University of Niš, Municipality of Niš, 2023, p. 317.

- 16 Joris D. Kila, *Heritage Under Siege: Military Implementation of Cultural Property Protection Following the 1954 Hague Convention*, Brill, Leiden – Boston, 2012, p. 98. On the eve of Vidovdan in 2001, His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Mr. Pavle sent a letter to Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary General, and Koiciru Matsuri, UNESCO Secretary General, on the occasion of the destruction of Serbian monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija and Skopska Crna Gora. His Holiness Patriarch Pavle expressed concern about the safety of the Mateič Monastery, situated in the village of the same name, which he claimed was at great risk from Albanian terrorists. He feared that during the conflict between the Macedonian army and terrorist forces, the Orthodox shrine would be mined or bombed. Cf. *Matejce Mission Provisional Report*, available at: <https://www.icomos.org/public/risk/2001/mace2001.htm> / (accessed on 7. November 2022).
 “We asked the office of UNESCO in Sarajevo to come and make a new monitoring of the monument. We plan to go and see the church next week. Generally speaking, everyone shows a good will to protect the monument – the local government and the mayor of Lipkovo. Last year we asked OSCE to secure us while we closed the church openings. After the changing of the Constitution and after the Legislation for amnesty we asked for a police unit to be stationed in the monastery, so that the experts can make conservation. Officially, there is no one there, but it is a public secret that the place is not secure by day, and not to speak how insecure it could be at night“ stated Jovan Kondijanov, at that time the manager of the Institute for protection of the cultural monuments. Statement is published online in the article for *Dnevnik*, 11.04.2002: *Even After the Ending of the Military Clashes a New Vandal Attack on the Church Protected by UNESCO – Dug and Ruined the Frescos in the Monastery in Matejce*; <https://archive.ph/8eWlz#selection-527.1-527.20> / (accessed on 21. December 2024).

flict.¹⁷ The restoration of the suspected damage was financially supported by the Dutch Embassy in Skopje, with the staff of the EU Monitoring Mission also joining in. It was recommended that Macedonian and international experts should undertake treatments.¹⁸ The mission revealed numerous devastations, including damages to frescoes, such as the Virgin Mary with Christ and the fresco of St. Apostle Peter with sprayed graffiti, “Dgego Armando Maradona; Kupa Uefa,” and a sprayed double-headed eagle with the UÇK abbreviation inside (Figure 11).¹⁹ This sort of iconoclasm and damaging the world cultural heritage raises questions about how armed conflicts and intentional damage to Serbian medieval churches built in endangered zones should be interpreted.²⁰

Mateič Monastery became emblematic of the broader failures of post-conflict cultural reconciliation where heritage is not only materially endangered but also ontologically destabilized.²¹

17 Dinu Bumbaru, *Heritage at Risk: ICOMOS World Report 2001/2002 on Monuments and Sites in Danger*, Munich: K. G. Saur, 2001, pp. 133–135.

18 The initial report on the state of the Mateič Monastery, which was conducted on July 6-7, 2001, included photographic evidence provided by EU Monitoring Mission. The photos showed that the church’s roof had been damaged and UCK graffiti was present on some of the mural paintings, though not on the fresco paintings. The report advised against any attempts to touch or remove the graffiti on the mural paintings, as doing so could cause further extensive and irreparable damage to the 14th-century Byzantine murals. The report also recommended that only Macedonian and international experts should be involved in any restoration efforts. However, it was later discovered that the frescos had indeed suffered damage. In September 2001, a fact-finding mission was conducted by experts from the Republic’s Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, while members of the UCK were still occupying the site. Joris D. Kila, *Iconoclasm in the Orthodox Monastery of Mateje in Macedonia: The Creative Use of Damaged Cultural Property, Heritage and Identity Issues in Cultural Heritage Protection*, ed. J.D. Kila, J.A. Zeidler, Brill, Leiden–Boston, 2012, p. 98.

19 Upon closer examination of the graffiti in Mateič, the team observed that some murals had been sprayed with green paint while others had been drawn on with black ink. Tiny fragments lying on the floor were collected as samples from parts of the mural-free wall, and from the wall surface covered with green paint and black ink. The readily available spray can paints are based on two types of binding agents, acrylics, and alkyd. Laboratory tests showed that the green graffiti was likely done with acrylic paint, which was easily removable with acetone and wadding. However, removing the black marker ink used on the painting of St. Peter was a more challenging task due to the direct dissolution of color pigments in the basic acetone liquid, which could cause chromatographic reactions that separate the color pigments. Alcohol was not effective in removing the ink, but ethyl acetate and acetone did the job, although using a gel instead of a liquid was deemed the best option to prevent damage to additional layers during cleaning. Joris D. Kila, *o.c.*, 100–102.

20 Joris D. Kila, *op.cit.*, 25, 102. Cf.: Jasmina S. Ćirić, *Endangered Cultural Heritage: Mateič Monastery, Mapping Eastern Europe*, eds. M. A. Rossi and A. I. Sullivan, <https://mappingeasterneurope.princeton.edu/item/endangered-cultural-heritage-mateic-monastery.html/> (accessed on 2 December 2024).

21 “In the interior of the sanctuaries on the slopes of the Skopje Crna Gora Mountain, the endowments of Tzar Dušan, Empress Helena, and their son Uroš, dating back to the mid-14th century, the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) vandalized the altar. They even dug on the floor of the altar, trying to find hidden treasure, horrendously “taking pictures” of the

This case illustrates the complex terrain where cultural heritage operates not only as a record of the past but also as a battleground for present identity politics. The destruction and subsequent neglect of the monastery serve as a poignant example of how heritage can be mobilized either as an instrument of healing or a continuation of historical grievances. In this context, the cultural level – often considered the “thickest,” most layered dimension of post-conflict transformation – emerges as both the most challenging and potentially transformative.²²

frescoes (...). Partial restoration of the basic damage was carried out several years ago and that was the end of it. Today, the sanctuary is empty, eerily deserted, without any divine services, and the people visit it only once a year, on the feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God.” Stated professor Viktor Lilčić Adams. Statement was published in the article of M. Stančić, Srpske svetinje bez imena i zaštitnika, *Novosti*, 8 November 2015.

Although partial preservation efforts have been undertaken by the National Conservation Center of the Republic of North Macedonia, the Monastery Mateič remains the most critically endangered medieval church in the country. The destruction of its lodgings, bell tower, auxiliary monastery buildings, children’s resort facilities, kitchen, dining room, and playground all bear witness to the once-vibrant spiritual and communal life that animated this sacred place. Over the years, the condition of the monastery continued to deteriorate. Although the church has largely been stripped of its original function as a true House of Salvation, it nonetheless endures as a profound symbol of Orthodox faith. Each year, on September 21, a small group of faithful gathers to honor the feast day of the monastery, despite the severe degradation: shattered doors and windows, vandalized frescoes, excavated floors, and pervasive dampness caused by a leaking roof. Against all odds, the church of Mateič monastery persists as a monument of extraordinary cultural and spiritual significance, not only for the region but for humanity as a whole. In 2022, the Minister of Culture of the Republic of North Macedonia announced the allocation of one million Macedonian denars from the budget for immovable cultural heritage, intended for preventive architectural and painting interventions at Matejče. This initiative represents an important step toward restoring the dignity of a sacred space shaped by the God-inspired vision of its founders, and recognized today as a treasure of global cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the preservation of the monastery remains a pressing and unresolved challenge, and substantial work still lies ahead to secure its future.

- 22 The protection of cultural heritage during times of war and conflict is a fundamental principle enshrined in numerous international legal instruments, such as the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the Hague Convention. However, these protective measures were not effectively enforced during the conflicts in the Republic of North Macedonia, leading to significant damage to important cultural monuments, including the church of Mateič. Despite repeated appeals from experts and public figures urging immediate restoration efforts, preservation initiatives were long neglected, leaving the site vulnerable to continued deterioration. “The monastery is protected under law, but after its destruction in 2001 its state gets worse and worse with each passing year. This year the sleeping quarters were burnt down. The new minister Irena Stefoska determined that the monastery will be one of her priorities” stated Jasmina Zisovska art historian and advisor for International Cooperation from the National Museum Kumanovo. Statement was published online in the article *Culture Ministry declares it will protect what’s left of the devastated Matejce monastery*: <https://english.republika.mk/news/culture/culture-ministry-declares-it-will-protect-whats-left-of-the-devastated-matejce-monastery/> (accessed on 11 January 2025).

It is crucial to recall that following the dissolution of the Stability Pact, which originally provided a framework for regional post-conflict cooperation, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was established in 2008. The RCC's mission has been to foster regional development and cooperation across sectors, including cultural and social domains (Taleski 2013, 5). Within this evolving framework, integrative normative solutions have been advanced to support minority rights, promote participation in public life, and implement power-sharing mechanisms. For example, North Macedonia has adopted state reforms such as quotas in Parliament and parallel educational systems to accommodate ethnic diversity.²³

However, in the domain of public memory and cultural heritage, reconciliation remains uneven. Ethno-national narratives continue to dominate institutional memory and heritage policy, often in tension with broader intercultural goals. In such a landscape, the destruction and partial rehabilitation of heritage sites like Mateič underscore a deeper crisis of representation: the symbolic and ontological dimensions of heritage now hold greater significance than the material form itself (Figure 12). This becomes especially evident when one considers the site's associations with elements of *intangible cultural heritage*, such as Byzantine hymnography and ecclesiastical music, inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List in 2019 (14.COM). The Church of the Holy Mother of God at Mateič is not only renowned for its monumental architecture and painting program, but also as a site of liturgical creativity and manuscript production. Hieromonk Isaiah the Serb, one of the most prominent medieval Serbian hymnographers, composed the *Serbian Polyeleos* (Πολυέλεος Σερβικός) while residing at the monastery,²⁴ and Vladislav the Grammarian – who referred to Mateič as his “dwelling and residence” in 1472/1473 and 1479 – compiled influential liturgical collections, including one that remains preserved at the Rila Monastery. These intangible practices and affiliations further complicate the meaning of heritage in post-conflict contexts, highlighting the need for heritage policies that account not only for physical conservation, but for the preservation and activation of shared ritual, musical, and linguistic traditions.²⁵

As scholarship has increasingly recognized, heritage can be both a tool for establishing durable peace and a medium for perpetuating conflict.²⁶

23 Antonija Petričušić, Cyril Blondel, Introduction - Reconciliation in the Western Balkans: New Perspectives and Proposals, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 11(4) (2012), pp. 1–6, esp. 1.

24 Diane H. Touliatos-Banker, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Greece: Byzantine Chant and Other Music Repertory Recovered*, Farnham: Routledge, 2010, p. 125.

25 Димитрије М. Калезић, *Енциклопедија њавославља*, тл. 2, Београд: Савремена администрација, 2002, 1186; Мирјана Веселиновић – Хофман, *Историја српске музике: српска музика и европско музичко наслеђе*, Београд: Завод за уџбенике, 2007, 304.

26 In the context of international cultural heritage protection, the most important regulation recognized by both parties is the Convention for the Protection of the World

Given these tensions, the future of sites like Mateič and more specifically the Black Mountain Area (Skopska Crna Gora), calls for innovative and inclusive heritage diplomacy.²⁷ One such strategy could be the transnational nomina-

Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), adopted by UNESCO. This convention provides the primary legal framework for the nomination of cultural properties to the World Heritage List, representing the highest level of international recognition and protection. Cf. UNESCO, (1972), Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Adopted by the General Conference at its seventeenth session, Paris, 16 November. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/> / (accessed on 3 April 2025).

Both North Macedonia and Serbia are signatories of this document, which means they are obligated to take all necessary measures to protect their cultural heritage, including joint initiatives for the nomination of monuments such as the Mateič Monastery, which is also located in a conflict zone. In this regard, it is also important to note the Protocol on the Importance of Cultural Heritage Protection in Armed Conflicts, adopted in 1954, which provides legal protection for cultural property during wars and conflicts. This protocol becomes particularly important for assessing the damage caused by the wars in the Balkans in the 20th century, as well as for the obligation of countries to facilitate the return of cultural property that has been unlawfully taken. Cf. *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>; and *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, <https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/1954-convention?hub=66535>. / (accessed on 27 April 2025).

- 27 The environmental possibilities for research in the area of Mateič can be enriched by drawing a symbolic comparison with the concept of the Garden of Eden. The Garden is not necessarily a utopia, nor merely a vision for the future; rather, it represents a possibility rooted in the present – a conscious choice to restore relationships with our fellow human beings, to care for the environment that sustains us, and to practice daily acts of solidarity. It reminds us that our responsibility extends beyond the present moment, compelling us to safeguard the future. Trust in God grows from trust in humanity; a genuine relationship with others clarifies and deepens our relationship with the Divine. At the same time, it calls us to uproot the ‘weeds’ within ourselves and in our surroundings, allowing nature to breathe and honoring the Creator’s legacy as well as the right of the Heir. Cf. Evlambia Tsireli, *The Man in the Garden: The Bible and Manuscripts as an Interdisciplinary Approach to Environmental Education*, *Forum Ecumenical Initiative for the Protection of Environment and Culture – Istanbul–Halki Island, Theological School, September 4–5, 2021, Proceedings*, eds. S. Tanou and S. Thatharopoulou, Thessaloniki, EKBM, 2022, p. 32.

In accordance with the broader framework of intangible cultural heritage, the notion of the “Holy Mountain” in the Mateič region represents a living tradition. Beyond the materiality of its landscape, it encompasses spiritual beliefs, rituals, and the cultural memory that venerates the mountain as a sacred locus, similar to the recognized heritage categories of sacred forests and mountains in international heritage discourse. See also the Legacy Resource Management Program, established in 1990 by the United States to support the protection of natural and cultural heritage within the Department of Defense (DoD) framework. Among its initiatives, the Cultural Property Protection (CPP) program produced the CPP Playing Cards, one of which features the fresco of Mateič Monastery damaged by graffiti, highlighting international recognition of the site’s vul-

tion of contested sites to UNESCO's World Heritage List or other international heritage registers. A transnational nomination, guided by a shared commitment to intercultural dialogue and professional standards of conservation, would acknowledge the layered histories and plural meanings embodied in the site. It would also require institutional collaboration between Serbia, North Macedonia, and international heritage bodies, ensuring the representation of all scholarly voices and affected communities in shaping heritage narratives.²⁸ Such an approach would not only support the protection and rehabilitation of Mateič but could also serve as a precedent for the responsible stewardship of shared and divided heritage across the post-Yugoslav space.²⁹

nerability. Joris Kila, Cultural Property Crimes in the Context of Contemporary Armed Conflicts, *Journal of eastern mediterranean archaeology and heritage studies*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2013), pp. 328–329.

- 28 UNESCO, 2021. Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention. (1977–2021, latest version) Paris: WHC.21/0. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/> / (accessed on 2 April 2025).

The author of this text has repeatedly spoken about the necessity of mentioned cooperation, both on the Second Program of Radio Belgrade (*The Last Imperial Endowment of the Nemanjić Dynasty – Mateič Monastery*,” *Riznica*, edited by Dušanka Zeković, aired on April 10, 2022; <https://www.rts.rs/radio/radio-beograd-2/4771415/poslednja-carska-zaduzbina-nemanjica-manastir-mateic.html> / (accessed on 30 April 2025); see also “*The Medieval Heritage of the Nemanjić Dynasty in the Territory of Present-Day North Macedonia*,” *Riznica* program, edited by Dušanka Zeković, aired on October 6, 2024, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/radio/radio-beograd-2/5548626/srednjovekovna-bastina-nemanjica-na-tlu-danasnje-severne-makedonije.html>, (accessed on 30 April 2025). Regarding the transnational nomination see the statement on the Public Service of Radio Television of Serbia (*Srbija na vezi*, aired live on November 25, 2024, at 6:55 PM, the program addressed the position of Serbs in North Macedonia, on the occasion of the roundtable discussion “The Life of Serbs in North Macedonia – History, Challenges, and Perspectives.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xKtcmYR54g).

- 29 Raechel Anglin, The World Heritage List: Bridging the Cultural Property Nationalism-Internationalism Divide, *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 241 (2008), pp. 241–275; ICOMOS Charter – Principles for the Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage, ICOMOS 2003 http://www.icomos.org/charters/structures_e.pdf / 25.01.2025; Vileikis, Ona, Monitoring serial transnational World Heritage – the Central Asian Silk Roads experience, *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*, 7(2–3) (2016), pp. 260–273.

For other examples of transnational nominations, see: Višnja Kisić, Exhibiting the Balkans Imagined: An Excess in Mediating (Trans)National Memories, *Journal of the Faculty for Drama Arts: Media Archaeology*, 28 (2016), pp. 253–364; Eadem, Transnational nominations to the World Heritage List: beyond competitive national practice, *Governing Heritage Dissonance: Promises and Realities of Selected Cultural Policies*, Belgrade: European Cultural Foundation, 2016, pp. 101–107; Eadem, Transnational nominations for the UNESCO World Heritage List as a policy tool in post-war contexts: The case of Stećci Medieval Tombstone Graveyards, Inventory of inclusive cultural policies, INVENT project Horizon 2020, s.l. 2023, available online: <https://inventculture.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SERBIA1.pdf> / (accessed on 20 March 2025).

4. TOWARDS A TRANSNATIONAL NOMINATION: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The deteriorating condition of the Black Mountain monastery church (Mateič), demands not only immediate attention but also a sustainable, forward-looking strategy. The current absence of structural international mechanisms for effective monitoring and intervention has rendered these monuments exceptionally vulnerable – not only to physical degradation but also to politicization and historical erasure.³⁰ In this context, a long-term vision can be envisioned, centered around the preparation of a trilateral nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List, involving Serbia, North Macedonia, and Greece. Such a nomination would not only be feasible but also highly desirable,³¹ both from a heritage management perspective and in view of the shared Byzantine legacy that links key monuments across the region, similar to other successful transnational nominations such as the Danube Region and Stećci.³²

This approach builds upon the growing academic and institutional momentum surrounding cross-border nominations, as well as the conceptual framework developed through initiatives such as the *Byzantine Oecumene* initiative. Particularly significant is the formal cooperation between the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of North Macedonia and the European Centre for Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments (EKBMM), under which conservation work on key

30 To ensure the long-term preservation of medieval churches, it is essential to establish continuous monitoring programs that systematically track and assess their condition. In this regard, initiatives such as the “Orthodox Heritage Monitoring” project – funded by the U.S. Department of State and implemented by ICOMOS Republic of Macedonia (concluded in November 2022) – constitute a significant advancement. Nevertheless, further efforts are required to achieve comprehensive protection of this vulnerable cultural heritage. For instance, while the Church of the Holy Virgin Bolnička in Ohrid was documented within the framework of this project, the Church of St. Nicholas Bolnički – despite facing similar threats – was not included. Likewise, the Mateič Monastery has yet to be incorporated into the monitoring program. For more information, see: <https://monitoring.icomos.org.mk/home>.

31 Recommendation concerning protection at National Level of cultural and Natural heritage: <https://www.icomos.org/public/publications/93towns7g.pdf> and <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-protection-national-level-cultural-and-natural-heritage/> (accessed 11 March 2025).

32 Cf. *InterReg. Danube Transnational Programme 2021–2027* available at: <https://dtp.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/default/0001/43/ab7b047b3aab27ba6d5a1a0e866e-20ba86b5aaca.pdf> / (23 April 2025); Katherine Lenz, Mihaela Florea, Helene Schabasser, EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs), Wien: Danube Strategy Point (DSP), 2020. For Stećci cf. Maja M. Đorđević, Stećci, Medieval tombstones – Cultural Heritage, the Promoter of interstate cooperation, *Achievements of the convention concerning the Protection of world cultural and natural heritage 50 years of duration /1972–2022/ of the convention concerning the Protection of world cultural and natural heritage*, ed. N. Debljović Ristić. – Belgrade : University of Belgrade, Faculty of Architecture, 2023, pp. 130–148.

monuments like Kurbinovo and Treskavec has been carried out. This collaboration has provided both a methodological model and a diplomatic framework for constructing a nomination grounded in scholarly consensus and cultural continuity.³³

The first step in this trilateral nomination process is the formalization of inter-governmental cooperation, ideally through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Ministries of Culture of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Greece. This MoU should define the overarching goals, responsibilities, and scope of the nomination, as well as outline the necessary mechanisms for collaboration (Figure 13).³⁴

The agreement must ensure that each country's contributions are respected and effectively integrated into the nomination process. Additionally, it should designate official coordinators within each country who will liaise with the Trilateral Coordination Body to streamline communication and decision-making processes. The establishment of this body will be crucial for managing the bureaucratic and administrative requirements, ensuring a fluid and coordinated effort across national boundaries and conflicts.

At the core of this project must be the formation of a Multidisciplinary Expert Commission. This body should consist of scholars, conservators, and legal experts with a strong background in Byzantine art and architecture, liturgy, theology, conservation science, and international heritage law. The inclusion of Greek scholars, particularly those who have worked within the framework of the EKBMM and *Byzantine Oecumene* initiative, is both strategic and necessary. Their experience with transnational heritage nominations, such as those involving sites in Greece, North Macedonia, and Serbia, will be invaluable in navigating the complexities of this trilateral nomination.

The next step involves comprehensive field documentation, which forms the backbone of the UNESCO nomination dossier. This will include high-resolution architectural surveys, 3D scanning, and photographic documentation, alongside a thorough risk assessment of the church's physical condition. It is essential that the

33 European Centre for Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments. *Conservation Works in Kurbinovo*. [Online]. Available at: <https://ekbmm.gr/en/single/conservation-of-the-frescoes-of-the-church-of-agios-georgios-in-kurbinovo-north-macedonia-2021-2024/> / (accessed on 27 April 2025); European Centre for Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments. *Research Works in the Catholicon of the Dormition of the Virgin Monastery in Treskavac*. EKBMM. Available at: <https://ekbmm.gr/en/single/research-works-in-the-catholicon-of-the-dormition-of-the-virgin-monastery-in-treskavac/> / (accessed on 27 April 2025).

34 This process requires collaboration between states, wherein each country nominates the portion of the cultural property located within its territory. Cf. Paragraph 135: "Wherever possible, transboundary nominations should be prepared and submitted by States Parties jointly in conformity with Article 11.3 of the *Convention*. It is highly recommended that the States Parties concerned establish a joint management committee or similar body to oversee the management of the whole of a transboundary property." Paragraph 136: "Extensions to an existing World Heritage property located in one State Party may be proposed to become transboundary properties." This document is a partial export of the World Heritage Policy Compendium. / (accessed on 29 March 2025).

documentation adheres to the rigorous standards set by ICOMOS and ICCROM, ensuring both the technical quality and authenticity of the information.³⁵

A crucial aspect of this documentation will be the iconographic programs and the liturgical functions of the monument. These elements are key to understanding the spiritual and cultural significance of the Black Mountain monastery church (Mateič), as they not only reflect artistic achievement but also serve as vehicles for the transmission of theological and liturgical traditions. By highlighting these elements, the nomination process will emphasize the ongoing relevance of the church as a living space of worship, not merely as a historical artifact.

Parallel to the field documentation, a comparative analysis should be undertaken. This analysis will situate the nominated sites within the broader context of Byzantine sacred architecture across the Balkans. Such an approach will emphasize the continuity in Marian iconography, the persistence of pilgrimage routes, and the historical dynamics of regional monastic patronage. In this way, Mateič will be presented as a key part of a larger transnational spiritual geography shaped by centuries of artistic and theological exchange.

Integral to the success of this nomination is the active involvement of local communities and ecclesiastical representatives. It is essential that both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church be consulted at every stage of the process, particularly concerning the churches' spiritual functions and liturgical roles. The necessity of their participation is further underscored by the Tomos issued by the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, which formally defines the relationship between the two Churches in matters of cultural heritage. In this document, it is stated: "The holy churches and monasteries, especially the old sanctuaries from the Nemanjić period and from the later periods of Serbian presence, church architecture, and cultural creativity on the territory of today's North Macedonia, as well as *all movable and immovable property of the Serbian Orthodox Church within its borders, are entrusted for use to the new, autocephalous sister Church.*"³⁶ (emphasis added by J. S. Ć).

35 For a detailed discussion on the significance of this approach to the nomination of monuments, cf. Igor Pjotr Bajena, Piotr Kuroczyński, Development of the methodology and infrastructure for digital 3D reconstruction, *Amps Proceedings Series 29.2, (In)Tangible Heritage(S): Design, culture and technology – past, present, and future*. Canterbury: AMPS, 2023, pp.72–83, Available at: <https://tiny.pl/w26jp/> (accessed on 8 March 2025); Igor Pjotr Bajena, Piotr Kuroczyński, Challenges faced in documentation and publication of 3D reconstructions of Cultural Heritage: How to capture the process and share the data?, *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Cultural Heritage and New Technologies 2021 Vol. 26 No. Preview (2021)*, ed. s.n. Wien: Propylaeum, 2021, pp. 63–89.

36 Томислав А. Лупић, Македонски раскол – однос Православне охридске архиепископије и МПЦ, *Теолошки погледи / Theological Views LIII, 1* (2020), стр. 145–160; Nenad Živković, The Macedonian Question in the Serbian Orthodox Church, *Coping with Change – Orthodox Christian Dynamics Between Tradition, Innovation, and Realpolitik*, ed.

This provision highlights the deep spiritual and historical ties between the heritage sites and the ecclesiastical institutions, making their active engagement indispensable to ensuring that both the sacred and cultural values of the monuments are preserved. Recent events, notably the granting of autocephaly to the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church, have opened new possibilities for cooperation in safeguarding medieval churches.³⁷ Despite decades of historical separation, there is a visible trend toward rapprochement, reflected in increasingly frequent communication and collaboration between hierarchs of both Churches. This renewed relationship enables a more constructive approach to the protection of cultural and spiritual heritage. However, the realization of joint initiatives will also depend on continued political and legal stabilization in the region. To fully capitalize on these opportunities, urgent diplomatic measures must be initiated, particularly by the ministries of culture and foreign affairs of both countries.³⁸

The nomination dossier must be accompanied by a comprehensive Management and Monitoring Plan. This plan should outline governance structures, identify conservation priorities, and define protocols for ongoing monitoring. The plan should also address any potential threats to the nominated sites, whether they are environmental, political, or social in nature.

S. Rimestad and V. N. Makrides, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2020, pp. 209–231; Emil Hilton Saggau, *Nationalisation of the Sacred – Orthodox Historiography, Memory, and Politics in Montenegro*. Berlin: Peter Lang 2024.

- 37 Considering the political and economic challenges affecting heritage protection, it is crucial to reinforce cooperation with international organizations and to secure sustainable financial support. Skopska Crna Gora constitutes an exceptional organic entity, encompassing not only architectural and constructional achievements but also a cultural landscape shaped by the interaction between human activity and the natural environment, as well as the enduring influence of spiritual culture on architectural expression. The ratification by Serbia of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (2005) provides a normative basis for advancing an integrated approach to the conservation of cultural heritage as a fundamental element of sustainable development. While the implementation of such initiatives remains contingent on further political and legal stabilization, current conditions offer opportunities for responsible cooperation between ecclesiastical bodies and national institutions entrusted with heritage protection. Cf. Mladen Stančić, Svetinje Nemanjića na političkoj klackalici: Dr Jasmina S. Ćirić o problemima zaštite srpske kulturne baštine u Severnoj Makedoniji, *Večernje novosti*, January 13, 2025, available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/reportaze/vesti/1449118/svetinje-nemanjica-politickoj-klackalici-jasmina-ciric-problemi-ma-zastite-srpske-kulturne-bastine-severnoj-makedoniji> / (accessed on 19 April 2025).
- 38 Миодраг Д. Перић, Историјско-правни односи између Српске православне цркве и Македонске православне цркве од 1967. године до данас, *Политичка ревија* 76 (2023), стр. 115–134, esp 130; Sanja Jelisavac Trošić, Mitko Arnaudov, Serbia And North Macedonia, 2023: Economic Risks, Political Challenges And Security Threats, *Security Dialogues* 14(2) (2023), pp. 149–165; Zoran Vučković, An Outline of Serbian-Macedonian Relations in the First Decade of 21st Century, *Politeja* 11 (4) (30) (2014), pp. 363–371.

A key aspect of the Management Plan will be the establishment of a Permanent Secretariat or a rotating working group that can oversee the long-term sustainability of the trilateral partnership. This body would be responsible for ensuring that the management framework remains active and effective in safeguarding the nominated sites. Provisions for staff training, capacity building, and exchange programs between cultural institutions in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Greece should also be included in the plan, promoting long-term collaboration and knowledge-sharing.³⁹

Finally, the nomination process should be framed within a broader campaign aimed at raising international visibility for the nominated sites. Scholarly publications, digital exhibitions, and active participation in international forums will help reinforce the cultural legitimacy and global relevance of the nomination. Multilingual platforms and public programming should be used to promote understanding of the shared Byzantine heritage that underpins the nomination, reaching both academic and general audiences.⁴⁰

This campaign can also include educational outreach, with the development of pedagogical materials aimed at conveying the significance of the nominated sites to diverse audiences, from local communities to global tourists. These efforts will help ensure that the nomination resonates beyond the political and academic spheres, contributing to a broader appreciation of the shared cultural and spiritual legacy of the Balkans.

The proposed trilateral nomination of the Black Mountain monastery church (Mateič) and its affiliated monuments presents a unique opportunity to establish a model of regional cultural cooperation. This project not only aims to protect and celebrate a shared cultural heritage but also serves as a paradigm for post-conflict cultural diplomacy. The nomination represents a powerful expression of solidarity, one that reaffirms the lasting value of Medieval heritage on the Balkans across national borders.

39 A very important document is the Operational Guidelines of UNESCO which states: "Each nominated property should have an appropriate management plan or other documented management system that specifies how the outstanding universal value of the property should be preserved, preferably through participatory means." Cf. Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention *available at* <https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/>

40 A rapid survey of the World Heritage List shows that 147 out of 442 cultural or mixed properties in Europe are serial, as they include more than one component (around 33%). On the other hand, a very limited number of transnational serial nominations – 12 – are currently inscribed on the World Heritage List for the European sub-region and the Tentative Lists of States Parties altogether count 8 entries. ICOMOS, *Sharing Experience on Transnational Serial Nominations in Europe*, ICOMOS Europe Initiative: Project Report (Charenton-le-Pont: ICOMOS, 2021, pp. 19–25, 29–33. It is also interesting that, although North Macedonia is included among the countries eligible for transnational nominations, it has not been included in any such project to date.

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Figure 1. The Black Mountain Monastery (Mateič), southeast view of the church (Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić)



Figure 2. Tsar Stefan Dušan, Fresco on the south wall of Mateič, east of the southern entrance (Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić)



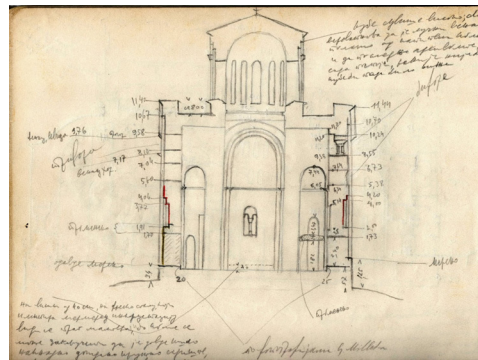
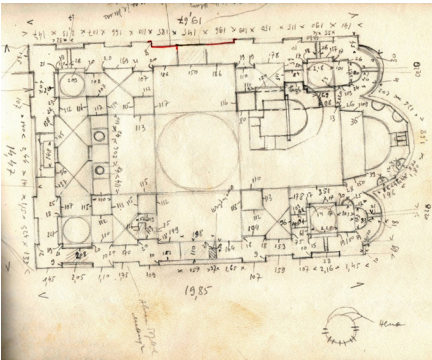
Figure 3. General view of the interior, south wall of the church (Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić)



Figure 4. General view of the church exterior, seen from the southwest (Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić)



Figure 5. Fresco of Empress Helena and her son Uroš holding a model of the church, eastern section of the south wall (Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić)



Figures 6 and 7. Architectural sketches by architect Đurđe Bošković, 1930 (Photo: Legacy of Đurđe Bošković, Archaeological Institute, Belgrade; scanned by Jasmina S. Ćirić)



Figure 8. Comparative view of King Milutin's endowment (Church of St. George in Staro Nagoričino) and the Black Mountain Monastery – Mateič (Photo: Jasmina S. Čirić)



Figure 9. Triumphal arch, Mateič (Photo: Jasmina S. Čirić)



Figure 11. Fresco of St. Peter near the northern entrance. The image on the left shows the fresco after the destruction in May 2001, when members of the UÇK defaced it with graffiti; the image on the right shows the fresco after the cleaning and restoration process (Photo: left image with graffiti by Joris D. Kila; right image by Jasmina S. Ćirić)



Figure 12. Threats to Mateič Monastery, diagram (Diagram: Jasmina S. Ćirić)



Figure 13. Transnational Nomination Process, diagram (Diagram: Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Јасмина С. Ћирић

ОДЈЕЦИ ЦАРСТВА, ИЗАЗОВИ САВРЕМЕНОГ ДОБА:
ТРАНСНАЦИОНАЛНИ ПУТ КА ОЧУВАЊУ МАНАСТИРА
МАТЕИЧ (МАНАСТИР БОГОРОДИЦЕ ЦРНОГОРСКЕ)

Р е з и м е

Рад се бави културно-историјским значајем манастира Матеич (Скопска Црна Гора) код Куманова у Северној Македонији, наглашавајући његов статус као споменика изузетне уметничке и духовне вредности који припада наслеђу из времена династије Немањића. Посебан акценат је стављен на могућност транснационалне номинације овог споменика за Листу светске баштине Унеска, што би омогућило бољу заштиту и подстицање билатералне сарадње између Републике Србије и Републике Северне Македоније. У раду се такође разматра потенцијал за трилатералну сарадњу, имајући у виду ангажман грчког Центра за проучавање византијских и поствизантијских споменика (ЕКВММ, са седиштем у Солуну), који већ учествује у конзерваторским пројектима у Републици Северној Македонији. У трећем сегменту рада посебно је анализиран дипломатски и културнополитички потенцијал транснационалне номинације као механизма заштите и помирења у постконфликтном балканском контексту.

Кључне речи: Манастир Богородице Црногорске, Матеич, династија Немањића, УНЕСКО листа светске баштине, транснационална номинација, културно наслеђе, Србија, Северна Македонија