



Problematic cultural heritage in the context of tourism and Bulgaria: Key concepts, main features, and contemporary research

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Abstract

Global trends of widening the scope of heritage for tourist consumption, as well as the growing interest among both producers and consumers in a more truthful and balanced representation of the past impose paying special attention to problematic cultural heritage in the context of tourism. Since the topic remains quite unpopular for tourism researchers in Bulgaria, this paper aims to present the key concepts explaining problematic heritage, outline the main features of such heritage as well as sketch contemporary research trends and gaps in this underestimated but promising academic field. Given the variety of terms used interchangeably in extant literature, the term "problematic" cultural heritage is proposed as appropriate for the Bulgarian context, emphasizing the notion of dissonant/contested heritage as a "problem to be solved". Its relevance to Ottoman and communist heritage in the country is justified.

Key words: Bulgaria, characteristics, contested heritage, conflict heritage, definition, dissonant heritage, research



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1. Introduction

Problematic heritage, often labelled as dissonant (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), contested (Olsen and Timothy 2002), or conflict heritage (Poria and Ashworth 2009), has hardly ever been the focus of mainstream tourism business and research. However, since the 1990s there has been a significant upheaval in perceptions of heritage worldwide, with a markedly increasing interest in the not-so-beautiful, sometimes unwanted, even painful and shameful past (Logan and Reeves 2009). Ashworth (2014) and Timothy (2018, 2021) observe that contemporary tourism demand is expanding beyond standard notions of heritage that include castles, cathedrals and fortresses with narratives emphasizing the elites and opulence of previous eras. Today's consumers increasingly understand that this "stereotyped" heritage constitutes only a small part of the "whole" and represents the past in an incomplete and distorted way.

Nowadays, more and more people want to see the "bigger picture" and delve deeper into history. Consequently, the business of tourism is changing, as is the way researchers treat the cultural past. On this basis, Timothy (2018) identifies

as key trends in contemporary tourism the wider range of resources used, as well as the growing interest among both producers and consumers in a more truthful and balanced representation of the past. This imposes paying special attention to problematic cultural heritage in the context of tourism.

As the topic is still quite unpopular for tourism researchers in Bulgaria, this paper aims to direct attention to problematic heritage and provide much-needed systematization and explanation of key concepts, main features and contemporary research in the field, predominantly based on foreign literature. Given the lack of a solid theoretical foundation and a unified definition adopted by scholars around the world (Liu et al. 2021; Axelsson Yngvéus et al. 2023), an attempt is made to define the term “problematic cultural heritage” in the Bulgarian context and justify its relevance regarding Ottoman and Communist heritage in the country.

2. Key concepts explaining problematic cultural heritage in the context of tourism

2.1. Dissonant heritage

Problematic heritage is most accurately defined and explained through the lens of the numerous contradictions arising at various levels in society. Pioneers in conceptualizing these contradictions are Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), who formulated the concept of “dissonant heritage”. According to them, dissonance is a state related to the lack of agreement and consistency regarding the meaning of heritage. Since heritage is always the product of social interaction, contradictions regarding its value and meaning are inevitable; that is, dissonance, hidden or overt, is inherently intrinsic to it (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). The authors highlight two main reasons underpinning this fact. The first is that heritage is an economic asset that is sold and interpreted in different ways for different audiences, including local and foreign tourists. The second reason is rooted in ownership—heritage always belongs to someone and thus not to someone else. The creation of any heritage excludes/deprives those who do not “fit” into the assigned meaning of that heritage and this can have a significant impact on both personal and social levels (Graham and Howard 2008). According to Ingerpuu (2018), these factors create tension and conflict at all stages of the heritage development and management process: from its creation, interpretation, and presentation to issues related to ownership and tourism marketing.

Graham (2002) further develops the idea of dissonant heritage through the prism of its diverse uses as a cultural, economic, and political resource. In his understanding, all heritage is multifaceted to the extent that many heritages exist, whose content and meanings change over time and space. Therefore, heritage is a complex and highly politicized phenomenon (Timothy and Boyd 2006), sometimes stemming from an invented, hidden, or purposefully selected past (Poria and Ashworth 2009). According to Graham (2002), the fact that heritage is both an economic resource and a cultural product turns it into political capital that fulfils critically important social and political functions. Thus, heritage is associated with a complex and often contradictory set of identifications and potential conflicts, including those related to its role in legitimizing

various power structures. Poria and Ashworth (2009) also focus on the conflicts caused by different viewpoints and political uses of heritage. They see it as a resource for legitimizing a certain social reality through the division of people into “us” and “them” claiming that heritage-based attractions present a fragmented, subjective version of objective reality, where someone’s heritage is exhibited at the expense of another one’s heritage to promote solidarity within a specific group by separating it from “others” (Poria and Ashworth 2009).

While many authors argue that dissonance is inherently present in all heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Smith 2006; Ashworth 2014), others do not believe that heritage is always a source of dissonance, although there is often significant tension between its economic exploitation and its social and political uses (Graham 2002). Certain scholars contend that not all heritage generates controversy and conflict (Porter and Salazar 2005), supporting the idea that there is dissonant as well as non-dissonant heritage (Battilani et al. 2018). Besides, using the example of fascist heritage in Italy, Battilani et al. (2018) explicitly differentiate between “dissonant heritage”, which has a contentious value for society, and “nostalgic dissonant heritage”, which evokes nostalgia for past eras and ideologies that are in sharp contradiction to present-day values of democracy and human rights.

2.2. Contested heritage

The term “contested heritage” has been used in the scientific literature since the mid-1990s (Tunbridge et al. 1996) but gained wide popularity after 2002 when Olsen and Timothy brought it into active circulation. With this concept, Olsen and Timothy (2002) emphasized the different social groups that can interpret the same heritage in various ways depending on their goals and the markets they operate in. According to them, it is precisely the different interpretation of heritage that causes dissonance and contestation of the messages while the selectiveness in the process of creating heritage and formulating its meanings makes it a complex phenomenon filled with contradictions. The authors outline two types of contested heritage: 1) when two or more groups recognize / use the same heritage and each group believes its interpretation is correct and the others’ is not, and 2) when there is a division within the same group—for example, regarding which aspects of heritage should be highlighted and shared with an external audience (Olsen and Timothy 2002). In addition, it should be noted that heritage can be contested in specific ways in different countries or communities, but according to Kisić (2016), contestation is generally inherent to pluralistic societies. Along with this, the complex relationships between the different stakeholders suggest the presence of not only active but also latent conflicts regarding dissonant/contested heritage (Nyaupane 2009).

Both the concepts of contested and dissonant heritage stem from unanimity among scholars in the field of tourism that heritage does not rely on an impartial study of the past but reflects selective mechanisms through which certain artefacts, memories, and traditions become resources in the present (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Graham 2002; Porter and Salazar 2005; Poria and Ashworth 2009; Ashworth 2014; Timothy 2018; Axelsson Yngvéus et al. 2023; Carvalho and Semedo 2023). This is closely related to the understanding that there is no such thing as single, unified history—instead, every perspective

and interpretation of history is, to some extent, subjective (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Dann and Seaton 2001; Poria et al. 2003; Timothy and Boyd 2006; Lennon 2017). Moreover, many authors emphasize that heritage is linked as much to forgetting as it is to remembering the past (Light 2000; Graham 2002; Smith 2006; Yankholmes and McKercher 2015; Aykaç 2022). Timothy and Boyd (2006) highlight the significance of collective amnesia, which is an expression of selective social memory regarding specific events or personalities and involves the deliberate ignoring of certain parts of history. Sometimes this goes as far as not only neglecting individual historical facts but completely erasing certain periods from public consciousness because, for various reasons, the respective society does not wish to remember and reproduce them (Harrison 2004a; Timothy and Boyd 2006; Logan and Reeves 2009).

2.3. Other concepts

Other concepts that constitute subcategories of “dissonant” or “contested” heritage include “difficult heritage” (Logan and Reeves 2009; Macdonald 2009; Kelpšienė et al. 2023), “unwanted heritage” (Light 2000; Šešić and Mijatović 2014), “dark heritage” (Sharpley 2009; Roberts and Stone 2014), and “heritage that hurts” (Sather-Wagstaff 2011). These concepts are used in studies of societies that have experienced wars and other disturbances, primarily in the context of using such heritage for tourism purposes (Ingerpuu 2018). Most studies on difficult/unwanted/dark/painful heritage focus on sites and events that evoke particularly strong emotions of pain and anger, such as the heritage from slavery, Nazism, various dictatorships, military conflicts, and terrorist acts. Disagreements in this regard arise mainly on the question of whether the bearers of unwanted and painful memories should be destroyed or if preserved, how they should be exhibited and interpreted.

On the other hand, Ingerpuu (2018) notes that unwanted heritage should not only be associated with the darkest episodes of the past; it can include more neutral and even mundane heritage, such as administrative, industrial, or agricultural buildings from various regimes and historical periods. In parallel with Ingerpuu’s notion and following the idea that “every heritage is someone’s heritage” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), it is worth noting that unwanted heritage for some is wanted and valued by others. This is the reason why certain authors prefer the terms “conflict heritage” (Porter and Salazar 2005; Poria and Ashworth 2009), “ambivalent heritage” (Battilani et al. 2018) or “controversial heritage” (Iankova and Mileva 2022; Webster and Ivanov 2022). By using such terms, they emphasize the sharp dividing lines in society and the contrasting perceptions of the value of problematic heritage (e.g., post-colonial or totalitarian heritage), as well as of the need for its preservation and utilization, and the desired or acceptable approaches to its presentation and interpretation.

A systematic literature review by Liu et al. (2021), encompassing more than 100 articles published in 58 international academic journals between 1996 and 2020 has found that the two foundational concepts of “dissonant” and “contested” heritage are widely used interchangeably. This is largely valid also for other terms that are often used as synonyms (Carvalho and Semedo 2023). In fact, scholars rarely define the concepts and terms they employ, although the topic of contestation and conflicts regarding heritage and its uses has gained

significant popularity in global academic research in recent years (Liu et al. 2021; Vlase and Lähdesmäki 2023; Kelpšienė et al. 2023). The study by Liu et al. (2021) has identified explicit definitions in only 14 out of 102 articles (including one article defining the term “contested heritage” and 13 defining “dissonant heritage”). Moreover, only two of these 14 articles offered their own definitions, while the rest of them cited the seminal work of Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996). Despite being integrated within the same conceptual framework provided by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), the focus of research on dissonant/contested heritage varies significantly from disagreement within different segments of society to inconsistency between the past and the present meanings of heritage (Liu et al. 2021).

3. Defining problematic heritage in the Bulgarian context

Based on the above overview of various concepts regarding heritage related dissonance, contestation and conflict, it could be summarized that after nearly 30 years during which the topic has been of scientific interest in the global specialized literature, a solid theoretical foundation has not yet been established, nor is there a unified definition and interpretation of key concepts and terms. In my opinion, this situation carries both negatives and positives from a research perspective. On the one hand, the lack of a strict and well-defined terminological apparatus complicates research. On the other hand, however, it provides freedom in the choice of existing terms and concepts and allows the introduction of new ones that best correspond to the scope and context of a specific study. Moreover, drawing on Light (2017) it is suggested that choosing a term or concept should be considered with reference to ease of translation to a specific language as well as fitting a specific way of thinking about heritage and tourism in a particular country or world region. For example, the concept of “dark tourism” has been criticized as reflecting a way of thinking that is specific to English-speaking countries and difficult to translate in other languages (Hartmann 2014; Ashworth and Isaac 2015; Light 2017).

Since neither “dissonant” nor “contested” heritage translate easily to Bulgarian language, it seems most appropriate to use the term “problematic heritage” in the Bulgarian context. It is not proposed as a separate concept but as a specific term, fully integrated into the conceptual frameworks of dissonant and contested heritage presented above. This term emphasizes the notion of dissonant/contested heritage as a problem to be solved (Carvalho and Semedo 2023). Thus, by “problematic heritage” I mean: heritage that is controversially perceived in society and provokes or has the potential to provoke serious tension and problems due to disputes regarding the meaning and value of this heritage, which arise from different, often conflicting interests with reference to its recognition, preservation, and utilization.

The term “problematic heritage” is not commonly found in the scientific literature, yet, it has been occasionally used by respected authors (e.g. Lennon 2017) precisely in the sense of dissonant/contested heritage. In my opinion, it is sufficiently comprehensive to reflect the contradictions and risks associated with perceptions of specific types of cultural heritage and their tourist consumption. At the same time, it is sufficiently neutral in terms of possible ideological presumptions in the evaluation of heritage since it does not inevitably

label the respective heritage as unwanted, painful or shameful. Similar to “dissonant” and “contested” heritage, the term “problematic heritage” takes into account the presence of different standpoints in society concerning the value and possible uses of heritage. Yet, it clearer directs attention to the necessity of seeking mutually acceptable solutions to the already pronounced as well as potential conflicts and problems in this regard.

Given the above definition, in my opinion, problematic heritage in Bulgaria boils down to two main categories: 1) Ottoman heritage from the period 1396–1878 and 2) Communist heritage from the period 1944–1989. This division should not be seen as definitive since these two categories do not inevitably encompass the full scope of problematic heritage in the country. Indeed, problematic heritage could be sought in other historical periods depending on the purpose and focus of a particular study. Nonetheless, I consider these to be the primary types of heritage that have the potential to provoke serious disputes and issues in Bulgarian society due to the complexity of their social and cultural contexts, and the associated conflicting perceptions and societal attitudes.

Both the Ottoman and Communist heritage are deemed detrimental by a considerable part of the Bulgarian society. Yet, they are recognized and valued by some social groups in the country, and certainly have tourist appeal that is possibly higher for the international than the domestic market. Although controversially perceived and largely unwanted, both types of heritage have left a strong imprint on tangible and intangible aspects of contemporary Bulgarian culture and, to an extent, shape the image of the country to the “outside world”. Policies and approaches regarding this heritage mirror complex societal perceptions and dynamic political circumstances, varying from intermittent attempts to erase it (e.g., the demolition of the Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum in 1999 and the removal of the Soviet Army Monument in Sofia in 2023), to assimilation (e.g., the reinterpretation of much of the Ottoman culinary and architectural traditions as National Revival heritage), or fuller integration into modern life, including recognition, preservation and effective utilization of such heritage for tourism purposes.

4. Main features of problematic cultural heritage

The main features of problematic cultural heritage as defined above fully correspond to those of dissonant/contested heritage. Therefore, they can be presented based on extant literature and the categorisation provided by Liu et al. (2021) who distinguish three major characteristics of such heritage: 1) the presence of numerous stakeholders often with conflicting interests; 2) the conscious or involuntary marginalization of some of the stakeholders; 3) changeability over time. Each of them is briefly explained in the following paragraphs.

4.1. Numerous stakeholders with conflicting interests

The conflicting interests of numerous stakeholders make contested heritage a highly complex issue, as satisfying the interests of one group can seriously harm the interests of another group. At the same time, the presence of diverse interests and goals even within individual stakeholder groups further deepens the problem because it creates internal divisions where everyone tries to

impose their own vision (Olsen and Timothy 2002). Both intergroup and intragroup struggles about heritage lead to tension and conflicts (Nyaupane 2009). Additionally, Jones et al. (2017) note that participants in the process of contestation can be not only group but also individual players; both official and unofficial stakeholders.

Based on their conflicting interests and participation, different stakeholders can be classified into seven groups (Liu et al. 2021): 1) public authorities, who play a key role because they make the primary decisions regarding the fate of heritage; 2) the local community (including residents, various ethnic minorities, religious groups, etc.), where there are always conflicts regarding heritage, with internal conflicts within this group being potentially greater than those with other stakeholder groups; 3) heritage professionals/experts, who form a separate group, as they often challenge the decisions made by public authorities regarding heritage management; 4) visitors, including local and international tourists, as well as representatives of various diasporas; 5) managers and operators of tourist attractions based on contested heritage; 6) non-governmental organizations whose conflicts with public authorities, the private sector, and the local population are typically related to heritage preservation; 7) the media, that do not directly participate in the contestation of heritage but play an important role in raising public awareness about the controversies and dilemmas surrounding the topic.

4.2. Conscious or involuntary marginalization of some of the parties

The broad range of stakeholders is a prerequisite for the conscious or involuntary marginalization of some of the parties. This is inevitable because heritage is inextricably linked to power, and those who hold power impose their viewpoint on the past (Harrison 2004a). This involves a process of social filtering where certain people or groups select the scope of heritage and its interpretation (Harrison 2004b). The process of marginalization aims not only to legitimize but also to delegitimize numerous cultural and social identities (Battilani et al. 2018). This applies to both authoritarian societies and stable democracies where those in power also struggle for control over the past, albeit with subtler means (Robertson 2018; Çoban 2018). Dominant groups in any society determine which monuments are important and which experts are responsible for their preservation based on their own views, goals, and interests (Battilani et al. 2018). The authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006) is an expression of hegemonic power and implies the prioritization of certain values and interpretations of history at the expense of others. Unequal power relations result in ignoring or marginalizing of certain viewpoints and initiatives regarding heritage, even within the same group of stakeholders (Corsale and Krakover 2019).

Highlighting or ignoring of one or another group of stakeholders is largely carried out through the content of the narratives and messages embedded in the interpretation of problematic heritage. Different groups within society can interpret the same heritage in fundamentally different ways to serve different goals and/or markets (Olsen and Timothy 2002). Problematic heritage is particularly characterized by the presence of “undesirable transmission” (after Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). It refers to messages that society as a whole or certain groups find highly sensitive or unpleasant. The transmission of such

messages is painful for some stakeholders, so they do not want to hear them, nor do they want to allow others to hear. This can apply to both the victims and the perpetrators of heinous crimes or their descendants who, for various reasons, do not wish to come back to moments associated with deep suffering, humiliation, and/or moral downfall (Yankholmes and McKercher 2015).

4.3. Changeability over time

Heritage is fundamentally a dynamic category because it is a product not so much of the past as of the present (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Graham 2002; Porter and Salazar 2005; Timothy and Boyd 2006; Poria and Ashworth 2009; Cohen and Cohen 2012; Ashworth 2014; Timothy 2018; Carvalho and Semedo 2023). It does not exist “in a vacuum” but is a function of ongoing changes in perceptions, interests, and values—both socially and individually (Logan and Reeves 2009). Heritage is used to serve different social, cultural, political, economic, and other purposes, which change over time and thus alter the memory and significance attributed to heritage (Graham 2002; Smith 2006).

Debates and conflicts regarding “heritage” take place in an ever-changing context, where the “achievements” of a particular class, ethnic group, nation-state, or era are subject to negotiation and re-evaluation by the next generation (Harrison 2004a). An important factor in this regard is the dynamics of power relations as certain historical narratives and myths are created and disseminated to affirm the ideology and identity of those who are in power (Edensor 1997). Depending on which actors hold a stronger position of power or have greater influence in society, the focus in the creation, preservation, and utilization of heritage shifts towards particular historical periods and/or heritage bearers. However, power relations are subject to periodic shifts, which can be quite abrupt. As noted by Harrison (2004a): “the barbarians are always at the gate, but today’s barbarians are tomorrow’s establishment”. Therefore, the past is neither independent nor immutable, but is subject to endless revision and negotiation (Lennon 2017; Axelsson Yngvéus et al. 2023). Thus, the contestation and problematization of heritage becomes an ever-lasting process (Harrison 2004a), particularly intense concerning those types of heritage to which public sensitivity is sharpened (Carvalho and Semedo 2023).

5. Contemporary research on problematic cultural heritage in a tourism context

Since heritage forms the core of cultural tourism, many researchers examine related contradictions precisely in the context of tourism. According to Porter and Salazar (2005), tourism provides an ideal environment to study heritage while simultaneously generating numerous conflicts that can be particularly fierce. It is considered that academic interest in the contentious aspects of heritage dates back to the 1980s when criticism emerged in the UK against treating heritage as a mechanism for creating and reinforcing a sanitized, idealized version of the nation’s imperial past to distract from the complex present and uncertain future (Hewison 1987; Suntikul and Jachna 2013). Over the past 20 years, the concept of dissonant heritage has consolidated in the scientific literature and has been widely applied, especially in studies regarding post-co-

lonial and post-communist societies, “dark” tourism, the self-determination of various ethnic or religious communities, and the increasing concern among different stakeholders on issues related to heritage use and management (Liu et al. 2021; Kelpšienė et al. 2023; Vlase and Lähdesmäki 2023).

Timothy (2018) observes that contemporary studies provide an increasingly holistic view of the use of heritage for tourism purposes, so this academic field is entering a stage of maturity. He identifies four signs of maturity in academic work on the topic, three of which are directly related to a deeper study of problematic heritage: 1) increased attention to various perceptions of heritage but also to the manipulation of heritage by those in power; 2) striving for a more complete and balanced presentation of the past; 3) expanding the scope of heritage-based tourism and its intertwining with other types of tourism, including dark tourism.

The systematic literature review by Liu et al. (2021) reveals that interest in the topic of dissonant/contested heritage was very limited prior to 2000 and significantly increased by 2010, continuing to intensify and reaching its peak in the period 2017–2019. The same trend of markedly increased scholarly activity after 2017 is observed regarding the presentation of such heritage in social networks (Kelpšienė et al. 2023). The growing engagement with this matter is probably related to the increasingly evident manipulation of heritage being considered a cultural, economic, social, or political resource (Ashworth 2014). Studies on the topic are conducted by academics with different research profiles (tourism, cultural studies, anthropology, history, geography, urban and regional development, political science, etc.), indicating the interdisciplinary significance of the concept and the need for a more comprehensive holistic view (Light 2017; Liu et al. 2021; Kelpšienė et al. 2023).

The types of heritage presented in the literature vary widely—from significant monuments listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites to ordinary places known to a limited number of people. The results of the systematic review by Liu et al. (2021) show that most publications focus on tangible cultural heritage. Natural and intangible cultural heritage are much less frequently examined in the context of dissonant/contested heritage. Furthermore, research addresses problematic heritage in urban rather than rural or natural areas. It is concluded that tourism and urbanization are the two areas most directly related to the contestation of heritage, which necessitates integrating the management of contested heritage with urban development and tourism (Liu et al. 2021).

It is also worth noting that contested heritage under study is primarily associated with tragic events and elicits varying degrees of negative emotions. This includes mainly heritage linked to colonization, slavery, wars, totalitarianism, religious division, and death. Historic neighborhoods, ethnic heritage, museums, archaeological sites, or industrial heritage are much less frequently included in research. This seems to be related to the view of Roushanzamir and Kreshel (2001) that dark pasts are more closely associated with contested heritage due to a higher risk of destruction of such heritage and efforts to erase the contentious historical context.

As observed by Liu et al. (2021), most research on contested heritage neglects theoretical issues, although recent studies show a growing focus on theoretical justification and theory-oriented contributions. Commonly used concepts are those of “dissonant heritage” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) and “authorized

heritage discourse” (Smith 2006) that provide an appropriate perspective on the contested nature of heritage and power relations. Since heritage is a social construct (Harvey 2001), other concepts borrowed from the social sciences are also applied in studies on the topic, such as: identity (Ashworth and Graham 1997; Edensor 1997, 2020; Palmer 1999; Robertson 2018), collective memory (Yankholmes and McKercher 2015), nationalism (Robertson 2018; Houliston et al. 2021), pluralism and multiculturalism (Ashworth et al. 2007; Tunbridge 2008), cultural diplomacy and neo-imperialism (Kersel and Luke 2015; Winter 2015), and neo-Ottomanism (Luke 2018; Aykaç 2022). Theoretical perspectives on two specific types of tourism—dark and nostalgic tourism—also represent a point of interest since both use one or another form of problematic heritage as a resource for development (Light 2017; Lennon 2017; Battilani et al. 2018; Bandyopadhyay 2018; Čaušević 2019; Mileva 2018, 2019; Iankova and Mileva 2021). In addition, the concept of “heritage proximity” (Uriely et al. 2002) deserves special attention, as it highlights the subjective perceptions of residents regarding cultural proximity or distance concerning heritage used for tourism purposes.

In terms of research geography, contested/difficult heritage sparks global interest (Kelpšienė et al. 2023), primarily in Europe and Asia, but also in North and Latin America, Africa, and Australia (Liu et al. 2021). The high concentration of such studies in Europe can be explained by its dissonant history marked by the stigma of two world wars, genocide, colonialism, and communism (Owsianowska 2017). The wide geographical scope of research on contested heritage indicates the international significance of the topic and the great variety of contexts in which contestation arises. Therefore, it is necessary to identify common features as well as specific problems regarding the subject (Logan and Reeves 2009; Liu et al. 2021).

Although problematic cultural heritage has recently stirred spirits in Bulgarian society (mainly with reference to some communist monuments), it is generally far from the attention of tourism researchers in the country. As far as the topic is concerned, authors rarely deal with theoretical frameworks. A notable exception is the concept of heritage societal attitudes and feelings formulated on the basis of longitudinal research on the treatment of communist heritage in Bulgaria for the period 1990–2020 (Iankova and Mileva 2021, 2022). Through this concept the authors emphasize that society is not homogeneous in its perceptions of problematic heritage. To fully understand public attitudes, it is necessary to explore the entire spectrum of emotions that lead to the treatment of this heritage in one way or another. They developed a five-point scale to measure attitudes toward such heritage, covering a spectrum from hate to love, with animosity, indifference and sympathy positioned between the two poles. These attitudes and emotions largely determine the actions taken on behalf of society (through governmental institutions), resulting in whether this heritage is preserved or destroyed, integrated or ignored. Iankova and Mileva (2022) note that the five emotions are not always experienced and expressed in society with the same intensity and that two or more emotions can co-exist. Moreover, various feelings and attitudes can also emerge and fade, or co-exist in latent or dormant states, and when the social conditions are right, emerge again or be quashed and disappear. They also link the spectrum of public attitudes toward contested heritage to Butler’s (1980) concept of the tourism des-

tinuation life cycle, suggesting that in the development stage of a given heritage site or attraction, love prevails in social sentiments; in the stagnation stage, indifference dominates; in the decline stage, hatred and animosity emerge; and in the rejuvenation stage, sympathy and love reappear (Iankova and Mileva 2022).

Most other research regarding Bulgaria's problematic heritage is empirical in nature and focuses mainly on the attitudes towards communist heritage and its inclusion in the tourism offerings (Ivanov 2009; Ilakova 2013; Poria et al. 2014; Iankova and Mileva 2014, 2021; Ivanov and Achikgezyan 2017). Only recently, several papers dedicated to perceptions of Ottoman heritage as a tourism resource have been published (Dogramadjieva 2021; Terzić and Dogramadjieva 2022; Dogramadjieva and Terzić 2024). To date, the issue of both Ottoman and communist heritage has been jointly addressed in only one publication (Houlston et al. 2021), where, however, the two types of heritage are not explicitly labelled as contested or problematic heritage. As abroad, most studies in Bulgaria refer to individual case studies. Yet, the topic of contested/problematic heritage and tourism has recently become a subject of comparative international studies involving Bulgaria along with other countries. Such examples are the study on the extent to which nationalism (including with reference to Ottoman and communist heritage) is present on the official tourism websites of Balkan countries (Houlston et al. 2021) and the study on student perceptions regarding Ottoman heritage and its possible tourism utilization in Bulgaria, Serbia, North Macedonia, Croatia, and Hungary (Terzić and Dogramadjieva 2022; Dogramadjieva and Terzić 2024).

In terms of communist heritage, Ivanov (2009) argues that despite its controversy, it should be preserved and used in tourism, but its development must be based on balanced representation of the past avoiding extremely positive or negative interpretations. Ilakova (2013) focusses attention on complex memories of the communist past in Bulgarian society and suggests that as long as they are swept under the carpet, the forced partial collective amnesia will keep displaying symptoms of "collective schizophrenia". She calls for re-branding of this contested heritage through the construction of re-negotiated, alternative narrations and interpretations of the recent past, taking into account the different positions in society.

Iankova and Mileva (2021) argue that communist heritage is now facing a big challenge to survive since it is mostly a subject of destruction or recycling and, on smaller scale, of protection and conservation. They contend that the socialist period needs to be treated with the same full consideration and the same level of attention to detail and care as the Medieval period or Antiquity (Iankova and Mileva 2021). On the other hand, survey-based studies by Poria et al. (2014) and Ivanov and Achikgezyan (2017) highlight the importance of the individuals' perception of a communist heritage site when revealing their attitudes towards its restoration, tourism utilization, and visitation. Specifically, visitors' perceptions of a site in relation to their own heritage explain their evaluation of the socialist sites level of maintenance, the need to sustain it, their willingness to donate for its restoration and their willingness to pay an entrance fee (Poria et al. 2014). According to Ivanov and Achikgezyan (2017) communist monuments in the country receive less support for inclusion in tourism supply than other historical monuments and Bulgarians are less inclined to participate in trips to them as well as to donate money for their restoration. Still, the study

findings indicate that domestic communist heritage tourism demand exists, and tour operators need to include such heritage in tourism supply (Ivanov and Achikgezyan 2017).

As for the Ottoman heritage, findings of a pilot survey among Bulgarian students reveal that societal feelings are rather in the negative spectrum, with respondents showing almost equal doses of disinterest and hostility (Dogramadjieva 2021). Yet, entering deeper into the topic, perceptions change positively. Regardless of the restrained emotional attitudes towards Ottoman heritage, it is recognized as an essential element of shared cultural heritage, especially within the Balkan region. In terms of tourism, most respondents consider it valuable and attractive, though avoiding strongly positive assessments. Overall, in the case of Bulgaria, Ottoman heritage is categorized as “problematic” heritage from the perspective of public perceptions. Therefore, its appropriate inclusion in the country’s tourism offering requires consideration of the social sensitivity on the topic, but also the adoption of a more pragmatic approach (Dogramadjieva 2021).

On an international scale, study findings indicate relatively unfavourable situation of Ottoman heritage in the Balkans due to historical reasons, political connotations, and problems of public acceptance (Dogramadjieva and Terzić 2024) as well as lack of consolidated opinion regarding the public acceptability of a cultural route based on Ottoman heritage in Europe (Terzić and Dogramadjieva 2022). On the one hand, Ottoman heritage seems to be appreciated and considered suitable for tourism utilization. On the other hand, public resistance and widespread indifference to the matter are evident. Therefore, in order to gain broader support, the potential route’s thematic focus should be placed on cultural interactions among different nations under the Ottoman Empire, rather than on “pure” Ottoman heritage (Terzić and Dogramadjieva 2022).

Overall, the topic of problematic heritage in the context of tourism is a promising field of investigation, both on a global scale and in Bulgaria. This is because, despite the presence of multiple dissonances, such heritage can be successfully managed if a comprehensive understanding of the dissonance is achieved (Liu et al. 2021; Carvalho and Semedo 2023). The quest for a deeper understanding of this complex matter motivates the implementation of pluralistic and critical studies that aim to help achieve reconciliation and harmony between different people, cultures and values (Liu et al. 2021; Vlase and Lähdesmäki 2023). So far, however, knowledge about the nature and use of problematic heritage is still limited (Liu et al. 2021; Axelsson Yngvéus et al. 2023; Kelpšienė et al. 2023).

6. Conclusion

Based on a considerable body of literature, this paper deals with problematic cultural heritage that (although rarely labelled this way) has gained significance in different aspects over the last three decades. A global trend of widening the scope of heritage for tourism consumption and shifting attention from traditional stereotyped assets to undervalued, completely idle or underutilized components of the past as a tourism resource has been outlined by a number of ground-breaking tourism researchers around the world. This trend applies to the heritage of the “ordinary” people (as a counterpoint to the elites), to various

disadvantaged social groups and minority communities, as well as to a wide range of sites and events revealing the “ugly side of history” that evoke pain and shame instead of pride and admiration (Timothy and Boyd 2006; Logan and Reeves 2009) but also to more neutral and even mundane heritage from various regimes and historical periods, which is publicly perceived controversially (Ingerpuu 2018).

Although problematic cultural heritage has recently stirred spirits in Bulgarian society, it is generally far from the attention of tourism researchers in the country. As far as the topic is concerned, authors seldom deal with theoretical frameworks and do not even define the various terms that are commonly used interchangeably. Therefore, this paper presents the key concepts explaining problematic cultural heritage, outlines the main features of such heritage and sketches contemporary research trends in the field. It also proposes the term “problematic” cultural heritage emphasizing the notion of dissonant/contested heritage as “a problem to be solved”, thus clearer drawing attention to the necessity of seeking mutually acceptable solutions to the already pronounced as well as potential conflicts and problems. A definition and clarification of such heritage in the Bulgarian context is provided, fully integrating it into the pivotal conceptual frameworks of dissonant and contested heritage. Hopefully, this work could serve as a helpful base for future research initiatives in this promising field of investigation.

Given the variety of concepts and terms in specialized literature, theoretical perspectives are important because they explain the nature and mechanisms that create problematic heritage. At the same time, Liu et al. (2021) note that conceptual debates do not particularly help in dealing with such heritage. Other authors also believe that the issue of definitions is not as important as the question of the place of problematic heritage in the modern world, its connection with tourism, and what all this tells us about contemporary societies (Light 2017).

Among global scholars, there is a recognized need for more studies that directly explore the attitudes and opinions of various stakeholders to help mitigate conflicting positions, propose solutions, and promote sustainable development and utilization of contested heritage. It is precisely towards pragmatic issues related to the use and management of this heritage that future research on the topic should be directed. Particularly in Bulgaria, there are plenty of research opportunities regarding communist and Ottoman heritage and their tourism utilization. Exploring perceptions of various stakeholders can help find practical solutions with respect to different parties’ concerns and “sensitive” topics but also raise awareness of such heritage by outlining its importance and capitalizing on it through tourism.

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Data availability

All of the data that support the findings of this study are available in the main text or Supplementary Information.