

REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



**INSTITUTE FOR THE PROTECTION
OF CULTURAL MONUMENTS**

**REPORT
ON THE STATE OF CONSERVATION OF
MEDIEVAL MONUMENTS IN KOSOVO (SERBIA)
INSCRIBED ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST IN DANGER**

MEDIEVAL MONUMENTS IN KOSOVO (SERBIA) (C 724)

The Dečani Monastery

The Patriarchate of Peć Monastery

The Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša

The Gračanica Monastery

Belgrade, January 2025

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Introduction

The property “Dečani Monastery” (C724) was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in 2004. In 2006, at the 30th session, the World Heritage Committee decided that the site of the Dečani Monastery would be extended by adding three sites, the Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, Gračanica Monastery, and the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviša (Decision 30 COM 8B.53).

The property “**Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)**”, predominantly dating from the 13th and 14th centuries, was at the same session placed on the **List of World Heritage in Danger (Decision 30 COM 8B.54)** due to the threats to the site detected as follows:

- Lack of legal status of the property;
- Lack of legislative protection of buffer zones;
- Lack of implementation of the Management Plan and active management;
- Difficulties to monitor the property due to political instability, post-conflict situation (Visits under the Kosovo Stabilization Force / United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (KFOR / UNMIK) escort and lack of guards and security);
- Unsatisfactory state of conservation and maintenance of the property.

The Committee requested that the State Party (Serbia) works with UNESCO programmes, with the United Nations Mission to Kosovo (UNMIK), and with the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Priština in caring for the site.

Description and the Significance

Four components of the property “Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)” reflect the high points of the Byzantine-Romanesque and Serbian medieval ecclesiastical architecture and art, with its distinct style of wall painting, developed in the broader Balkans region between the 13th and 17th centuries.

The Dečani Monastery was built in the mid-14th century for the Serbian King Stefan Dečanski and is also his mausoleum. The church represents the last important phase of Byzantine-Romanesque architecture in the Balkans region. Built in marble, it is the largest of all medieval Balkan churches and exceptionally rich in well-preserved Byzantine painting and Romanesque sculpture.

The Patriarchate of Peć Monastery is a group of four domed churches featuring a series of wall paintings. All the churches display an extensive series of wall paintings, but the 13th-century frescoes of the Church of Holy Apostles were painted in a unique, monumental style. They are endowments of the Serbian ecclesiastical rulers, who are buried in there and their burial places are marked with monumental sarcophagi.

Early 14th-century frescoes in the church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša represent the appearance of the new so-called Palaiologan Renaissance style, combining the influences of the eastern Orthodox Byzantine and Western Romanesque traditions. The style played a decisive role in subsequent Balkan art. The founder of the church was the Serbian king Stefan Uroš II Milutin (1282–1321), and two bishops of Prizren, Damjan and Sava, also worked on its construction.

The Gračanica Monastery was among the last monumental endowments of the Serbian King Milutin (1282–1321). Reflecting the spirit of the Byzantine tradition that was slightly modified by the western influence, the main church of Theotokos with the plan, spatial arrangement, decorative wall treatment, and wall paintings taken together represent the highest artistic achievement of so-called the Palaiologan Renaissance style. That also made it an emblematic structure for Serbian Orthodox ecclesiastical architecture of the 14th century.

The property *Medieval monuments in Kosovo* (Serbia) is administered by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Republic of Serbia, through its institutions, the Ministry of Culture and the Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, in cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, is implementing a management plan pertaining to research, conservation and other works aimed at protection of the Outstanding Universal Value of the property, carried out by the experts from the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Serbia in accordance with the adopted annual program.

Response to the Decision of the World Heritage Committee

The condition of preservation of the components of the Dečani Monastery, the Patriarchate of Peć and of the Gračanica Monastery did not register any changes. The attributes of the Outstanding Universal Value are preserved.

The Dečani Monastery: the church has the most impressive series of the 14th century Byzantine mural paintings, the largest existing ensemble in the Byzantine world. It is an outstanding achievement of Romanesque sculpture. The regular monitoring of the condition of preservation of the mural painting was conducted in 2024. Based on the smaller-scale research examination, the project was prepared for resumption of the restoration works in Parecclesion, but no conservation and restoration works were carried out in 2024. An inspection of the condition of architectural sculptural elements was conducted and it was established that the condition was stable and that there had been no changes thereto.

The cathedral church of the Gračanica Monastery: the interior walls of the main church are completely covered with extraordinary fresco paintings. The conservation and restoration works on the wall paintings, that were carried out over a period of several years, were completed in 2018. The team of experts conducted a regular examination of the condition of wall paintings and determined that the condition was unchanged. It was established that architectural elements of the Church were in a stable condition.

The Patriarchate of Peć Monastery Church contains an impressive series of mural paintings in an almost complete form. These paintings demonstrate the heights achieved by the Balkan mural painting in the first half of the 14th century. An inspection of its condition was conducted in 2024, and it was established that the repair works on the roof on a part of the Church, which were carried out in 2021 and 2022, had considerably contributed to protection and preservation of architecture and mural paintings.

The preservation level of the component of the Church of Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren is in danger due to an increasingly unstable political and security situation, and despite the provided funds and other resources none of the planned works on the Church of Holy Virgin of Ljeviša component in Prizren were carried out in 2024. Extensive works were planned:

- to repair the Church façade, to strip the existing plaster and to provide new decorative plaster;
- to repair and to clean the stone floor in the Church; to replace the deteriorated steel window frames in the Church;
- to close the arched openings in the exonarthex; to relocate the candle votive stand from the Church narthex;

- to thoroughly clean and wash the Church façade and to repair the stone portal on the west entrance to the Church;
- to repair and properly arrange the stone sidewalk and flagstones surrounding the Church; to provide the rain drainage;
- to construct the drainage wells; to repair the fence wall that runs around the Church;
- to provide a connection to the electrical grid according to the electrical installation design;
- to install the distribution boards inclusive of the equipment for protection of installations and users;
- to sit the installations for general purpose convenience outlets and sockets;
- to provide installations and equipment for general lighting in the Church;
- to provide the lightning conduct system installations for protection from lightning.

Also, the planned works based on the conservation and restauration works' project on mural painting, which was designed based on the previously completed research works, were not realized. The exceptional wall painting dating back from the 14th century is covered with a layer of soot and grime due to the mortar shelling and deliberate setting of fire inside of the church in 2004.

Legal status of the property

The Dečani Monastery, the Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, the Gračanica Monastery and the Church of Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren were proclaimed cultural monuments based on the Law on Cultural Goods of the Republic of Serbia. In addition to that, they were categorized as cultural monuments of exceptional significance for the Republic of Serbia. The legal status of the cultural properties is unchanged, but the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Priština or PISG do not recognize their established legal status. The competent protection institutions in the Republic of Serbia carry out the protection measures for these properties in cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is their beneficiary and manager, and through the Ministry of Culture and Office for Kosovo and Metohija, which is an authority of the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

In accordance with the Article 40 of the new Law on Cultural Heritage („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“ No. 129/2021), the cultural heritage of the Republic of Serbia inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, including the cultural heritage on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija enjoys a special approach to preservation, protection, and care.

The Risks from Urban Planning and Transport Infrastructure

The condition in 2024 is without any changes.

- **Dečani Monastery**

From 2014 and 2018 till today, the Dečani Monastery component has been in danger owing to the intention of the Municipality of Dečani, part of the PISG, to construct an arterial road Dečani – Plav (Montenegro), and the road route has been planned to run through the buffer zone of the Dečani Monastery and immediately along the core protection zone of the property. The works that were carried out in 2020 are suspended only after the reaction of the international community. The terrain has still not been restored to its original state. The access road to the Monastery is restricted by the barricades that were placed by the KFOR units that are guarding the Dečani Monastery. The seriousness of the situation is also indicated by the fact that in 2021, Europa Nostra included the Dečani monastery on the list of "7 most endangered heritage sites in Europe".

When it comes to the new risks of urban planning and transport infrastructure, the Municipality of Dečani is working on implementing a new Development Plan for the period 2024–2032 which refers to the area along the Bistrica River, in the immediate vicinity of the monastery. The municipality declared the area along the river an urban development area with the intention of bringing the river, which has a distinctly mountainous character, into a system of concrete embankments with a promenade. Although there was no public debate on this document, Abbot from Dečani prepared an opinion on this draft and submitted it to the Municipality of Dečani in July 2024 (in Serbian and Albanian). Based on the proposed plans, it's estimated that the plan for a tourist site with a restaurant and toilets in the immediate vicinity of the monastery, at the source of Kisela Voda, and the events at that site (loud music, etc.) would disrupt life in the monastery. Also, the municipality's planning documents state that the access roads from Dečani to the monastery should be expanded with a pedestrian and bicycle path and a promenade should be created, to which the Abbot reacted sharply and this plan has not been implemented so far.

Having in mind the stopped construction works on the road Dečani-Plav and the fact that terrain has still not been restored to its original state, as well as, new Development Plan of the Municipality of Dečani, part of the PISG, close monitoring of activities and works near the monastery is necessary.

- **Patriarchate of Peć Monastery**

The Patriarchate of Peć Monastery is located in a relatively isolated position and is not under the impacts of urban planning construction. The local police provides the physical protection of the property.

- Gračanica Monastery

The Gračanica Monastery is located in the Gračanica populated area. In 2024, no changes have been observed in construction of buildings on privately owned land parcels in the buffer zone.

- Church of Holy Virgin of Ljeviša

The Church of Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren suffers the strongest impact of the urban planning changes in the immediate surroundings of the property. A busy road runs next to the Church, and the privately owned land parcels, on which construction work on residential buildings are carried out, are located in its immediate surroundings. The local police provides the physical protection of the property.

Management of the Property

The property *Medieval Monuments in Kosovo, Serbia* is managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Republic of Serbia, through its institutions, the Ministry of Culture and the Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, in cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, implements the management plan relating to the research, conservation and other works for protection of the exceptional universal value of the property, which are, according to the adopted annual programme, carried out by the experts of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Serbia.

Through the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, the Republic of Serbia provides legal and other types of assistance to the Serbian Orthodox Church in order to protect the Church property in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.

During the reporting year, 127 ethnically motivated incidents were recorded in Kosovo and Metohija, of which 9 were directed against Serbian cultural heritage (Source: Office for Kosovo and Metohija <https://www.kim.gov.rs/incidenti-kim.php>).

The property of Dečany Monastery is exposed to systematic desecration, as well as illegal confiscation, despite the existing legal framework and Resolution 1244 of UN Security Council. The monastic community of Dečany Monastery is still unable to enjoy the ownership over 24 hectares of the monastery property due to a failure to honor the ruling of the highest legal authority of The Provisional Institutions of Self-Government on the territory of Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija of May 20, 2016, annulling the decision of the Special Chamber of the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of June 15, 2015, even though in March 2024, the authorized representative of the Dečani Monastery received a cadastral extract with all the property of the Dečani Monastery, including 24 hectares, in line with the judgment of the Constitutional Court, which had been awaiting execution since 2016, as notes in point 10 of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Opinion 302 (2024)¹

¹ Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe Opinion 302 (2024), point 10: Against this background, the Assembly welcomes as a major breakthrough the implementation, on 14 March 2024, of the judgment of the Constitutional Court in the case of the Visoki Dečani monastery, which had been awaiting execution since 2016. Its implementation is a tangible sign of the commitment of the government to act in full accordance with the rule of law, irrespective of political considerations. The Assembly and the Committee of Ministers should continue to follow this matter with a view to ensuring that the judgment is fully implemented.

Interpretation / communication of World Heritage property

The medieval heritage in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija is subject to numerous research works on the historical, history of art and architectural values. The thematic studies that are in particular carried out within the projects in the academia or in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts provide for high level of interpretation of origin, history and value of the heritage, in particular for the goods inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo and Metohija is still, in the 21st century, one of the most endangered cultural heritage in Europe. Despite the fact that the heritage has a universal value incessant attacks on Serbian heritage in Kosovo and Metohija, attempts to rename and falsify history have become a daily occurrence.

In the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija on social networks and in tourist brochures, false information about the property *Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)* are continuously disseminated. There is an undisguised tendency, devoid of any basis, to completely eradicate the identity features of the Serbian heritage in Kosovo and Metohija and to tear it out of the Serbian cultural-historical context in which it has been created and persevered for centuries. That construction tends to erase the connection with the Serbian medieval state and the rulers who were their founders and whose mausoleums these monuments are. For example, such attempts exist in the case of the Patriarchate of Peć, the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša, Gračanica, as well as some other endowments of Serbian rulers, such as the Banjska and Holy Archangels monasteries near Prizren. The wall paintings in all said churches are treated in a similar way, where the features on the wall paintings with Cyrillic inscriptions in the Serbian language and topics related to Serbian history are ignored, that is, there are no indications of their belonging to the history of Serbian medieval art.

Groups of experts from different fields of interests and citizens are visiting churches and monasteries in an organized manner in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. Access is provided to the organized groups that have announced their visits in advance to all the components of the property *Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)*.

The availability of information about the exceptional value of the property *Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)* is ensured by means of the digital guides within the digitalization efforts on the tourist offer of Serbia.

- **Exhibition of Serbian Medieval Monuments in danger**

The Republic of Serbia is particularly committed to the protection of endangered cultural heritage in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, and its promotion internationally. On the occasion of

marking the 20th anniversary of the inscription of the Dečani Monastery on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2004, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, together with the Permanent Delegation of Serbia to UNESCO, presented an exhibition designed as a multi-sensory exploration of the Serbian medieval monasteries (Dečani Monastery, Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, Gračanica Monastery and the Church of Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren) in Kosovo and Metohija, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in danger since 2006, merging visual art, interactive media and cultural history to convey the profound significance of these sacred sites, focused on immersing visitors in the delicate balance between the monasteries spiritual and cultural richness and their current state of vulnerability. The exhibition was opened at UNESCO Headquarters on November 25th by His Holiness Archbishop of Peć, Metropolitan of Belgrade-Karlovci and Patriarch of Serbia, Mr. Porfirije, Minister of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, Nikola Selaković, Director of the World Heritage Center Mr. Lazare Eloundou Assomo and director of the Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy Mr. Arnaud Gouillon. Presenting the Monastery Decani, the choir of the Seminary of Saints Cyril and Methodius from Prizren performed at the opening of the exhibition. The exhibition's design elements create a cohesive visual narrative that guides visitors through the space and present four monuments (Dečani Monastery, Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, Gračanica Monastery and the Church of Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren). Advanced technologies, including XR presentations and point cloud data, allow for an in-depth exploration of the monasteries' intricate details, and enables visitors to interact directly with the layered histories of the monasteries. This approach fosters a deeper connection to the sites, allowing visitors to discover the artistic, architectural and historical significance of these monuments in a way that is both engaging and educational. Exhibition elements in XR are available through Holograd app, which can be also activated through exhibition catalogue. At the same time, exhibition has a dedicated website (<https://liveviewstudio.com/work/en-danger/>).

In the name of outstanding universal value, the preservation of which is one of the key missions of UNESCO, and in the name of historical truth, this exhibition awakens and calls the conscience of the public and stands against all violence, forgery and testifies to the necessity and nobility of the mission of protecting the cultural heritage of humanity.

After closing of the exhibition at UNESCO, it was opened in Cultural Center of Serbia in Paris, where it was opened until mid January. Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic missions around the world, will present this exhibition during 2025 and 2026, as a “travelling exhibition”.

Other information

Cultural institutions of the Republic of Serbia in Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija, totalling 17 institutions, are exposed to direct security threats to the physical and legal status and integrity of institutions and employees. Beside administrative and financial difficulties related to daily functioning of the institutions, when it comes to implementation of the program activities, approved by annual plans of the institution, most often they are faced with the problem of movement of personal, artists, performers, transporting materials, supplies, exhibition/performance elements, etc across the administrative crossing from and to Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.

By closing the institutions, possibility of life and exercising its cultural rights for Serbian and other non-Albanian residents in Kosovo and Metohija is being eliminated, and Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo and Metohija remain one of the most endangered cultural monuments in Europe.

In conclusion, faced with all above mentioned challengers, in cooperation with Ministry of Culture and related institutions in the rest of the territory of the Republic of Serbia, institutions in Kosovo and Metohija strive to implement their mandatory functions and necessary activities.

Public access to the state of conservation report

The Republic of Serbia agree that the State of Conservation report for the world heritage property “**Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)**” is fully accessible to the public.

Illustrations



Pic 1. Opening of the exhibition about Serbian mediavel monuments in UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, 25 November 2024 (Photo by Ministry of Culture Republic of Serbia 2024)



Pic. 3. Exhibition opening in Cultural Center of Serbia in Paris, 12 December 2024 (Photo by Live View Studio 2024)