
ALBANIA EXPERTS DISPUTE PLAN TO LEASE HISTORIC SITES

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The Albanian Culture Ministry plan to lease cultural monuments for up to 20 years has sparked a fierce debate about possible damage to historic sites.

Some heritage experts say the decision was not transparent, was decided without a proper debate and could result in damage to monuments, as has happened in past.

Leasing the medieval castles of Petrela in Tirana and at Lekursi in Saranda in early 2000s was cited as a bad example of public-private partnership, which had damaged heritage and history.

Auron Tare, an expert on heritage and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of UNESCO, told BIRN that Albanian monuments should not undergo the same fate as Petrela and Lekursi.

"They are no longer castles but just restaurants. Nobody can learn about their history by visiting them now," he said.

However, Culture Minister Mirela Kumbaro said that the decision followed a two-year study of the situation of monuments in Albania.

"Public-private partnership is one of the ways to administer cultural assets... and our decision on the issue is more careful than those of former ministers," Kumbaro argued.

Tare said he was not against public-private partnership over cultural monuments in principle, but in his opinion Albania is not ready for it.

"The country still lacks good practice in doing this, and the state control mechanisms over the private sector are very weak. We also lack private companies with experience in restoring monuments," Tare said.

"It is important to have an open debate on the issue that includes tourism bodies, as stimulating tourism through these initiatives is important. But we have to be careful not to lose the historic identity of these monuments," Tare said.

He said it would be better to hand some endangered or neglected monuments back to their original religious founders.

"Religious communities have a right to ask to administer them. I would prefer these objects to be given back to religious communities before passing them over to private management," he said.

Vasil Tole, head of the working group that prepared the law on Cultural Heritage in 2013, told BIRN that the priority was to preserve the monuments and not help private businesses.

He said a complete list of sites that need to be restored should be drawn up before any decision is made on leasing them.

"Besides a full list of monuments we need to clarify what types of business will be allowed to rent the monuments - and restrict others that should not do so," Tole said.

So far, the decision of the Ministry of Culture does not specify which monuments need restoration, or what categories of businesses will be allowed to rent them.

In 2014, the ministry led by Mirela Kumbaro repealed a decision made under the centre-right government of Sali Berisha to lease out Lezha castle, one of the most important monuments in the country. The decision to lease the castle was not based in law and contained procedural flaws, the ministry said.

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