

## INTERPRETATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RE-TRANSFORMATION OF MUSEUMS – A SHOWCASE FROM BULGARIA

**Maria Stankova**  
**Simana Markovska**

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### **Abstract**

*Purpose* - The topic of the need for re-transformation of Bulgarian museums is of particular importance for Bulgarian tourism. Destination Bulgaria has an inherited potential to match its direct competitors - Greece and Turkey - in the field of cultural tourism, in its varieties of museum and cognitive tourism. At the same time, however, existing museums are lagging behind the good management and modernization practices that can contribute to their competitiveness. Therefore, the purpose of this study is projected in two widespread beliefs that are typical of modern tourism practice. On the one hand, the satisfaction of tourists and stakeholders in destinations is of paramount importance. The management of competitive advantages must be subordinated to the concept of sustainability, while the tourist deserves the best possible memorable experiences. The other aspect concerns the tourist experience and the fact that more and more tourists are creating their own experiences. In this framework, the focus of research is on museums in Bulgaria, in view of their ability to activate their own networks and resources. Some good practices are presented, which could be multiplied to influence satisfaction with the help of the tools of interpretation.

*Methodology* – The chosen research methodology is in accordance with the formulated research goal. Complex in nature, the methodological apparatus deals primarily with quality methods. In particular, it includes a review of specialized publications on the subject, at the same time using methods of observation, expert evaluation and synthesis. However, at the basis are the case study method and the tools of interpretation.

*Findings* – In the process of globalization, limitation, vulnerability and endangerment of tourist resources, as well as increasing tourist and economic pressure on individual tourist destinations, there will be a growing interest in the opportunities provided by the development and application of interpretation techniques in museums. The studied practices and the conclusions made have their limited significance in the scope of the network of museums in Bulgaria. At the same time, however, any good practice presented is an opportunity for “inspiration”, which is also a universal experience. The findings of this study help to promote the transformation of museums in the development of their services in view of tourist experiences and maintaining sustainability in all its aspects.

*Contribution* – The topic is highly relevant for Bulgaria, because there are still no established practices for applying heritage interpretation, especially in the museums in their capacity of tourist sites. It is of significance for tourism and museum practices in general, taking into account the importance of satisfaction for modern tourists and the need for targeted and planned activities in this respect. Therefore, any scientific development on this topic will contribute to its supplementation and further development.

**Keywords** Tourism, Interpretation, Heritage, Museums, Trends

## INTRODUCTION

The last two years have put the tourism industry to the test, as well as all its related sectors. Under the influence of the COVID pandemic, attitudes, needs and expectations have changed, both in principle and in the specifics of tourist consumption. One of the interesting and attention-provoking cases focuses on museum institutions. Emerging back in Antiquity, museums are significant cultural institutes up to the modern day that preserve, conserve and exhibit tangible and intangible evidence of human deeds and the wonders of nature. In this role of theirs, museums are subject to cognitive interest and cognitive tourism. But in order to attract and maintain the interest of their various audiences, including tourists, they must be subject to targeted management and marketing. As Nikolay Nenov and Silvia Trifonova-Kostadinova specify in their 2020 article (Nenov & Trifonova-Kostadinova, 2020), under the new working conditions at the museums (during the pandemic), “the focus was laid on the audiences. Managers and exhibition specialists have harnessed resources and efforts to keep the attention of their audiences. Site and social platform administrators register and measure attendance, trying to capture what provokes and retains visitor interest.” Their thoughts concern both global museum practices and the opportunities of translating such an experience to Bulgaria.

In fact, museums in Bulgaria are a part of a professional network of museums and art galleries, the formation of which began in the 1950s (Nedkov, 2006). Their distribution by districts (NSI, 2021) shows that there are 184 museums on the territory of the 28 administrative districts of the country, the largest numbers being in Sofia-city (total of 18), Plovdiv District (14) and District of Stara Zagora (13). They study, store, document and promote a total of 7,624,159 individual items - cultural monuments and natural specimens. The museums in Bulgaria in 2021 were visited by a total of 2,915,000 people, of whom 360,000 were foreigners and the rest were Bulgarians (NSI, 2021a). Thus, in pandemic conditions, one can clearly see the contraction of the visitor flow, as well as the coming end of mass visits. Organized tourism cannot contribute to museums’ sustainability, and group visits cannot be guaranteed. It is obvious that there is a need to take action towards the transformation and adaptation of the museum as an institution in the specific conditions of the Bulgarian museum network with its socio-economic and political processes. And this is in direct connection and importance for both museum work in the country and the Bulgarian tourism industry.

Destination Bulgaria has an inherited potential for reaching its direct competitors Greece and Turkey in the field of cultural tourism in its varieties of museum and cognitive tourism. However, museums on its territory are lagging behind good governance practices that can help attract audiences (visitors) and raise their competitiveness. Based on such a finding, this study aims to outline the opportunities for Bulgarian museums to activate their own networks and resources, as well as to manage their competitive advantages in the context of sustainability, offering to visitors the best possible memorable experiences. Individual good practices are presented that could be multiplied and influence visitor satisfaction using the heritage interpretation set of instruments.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Specialized publications are found on the topic of museums and museum work in Bulgaria, which primarily focus on the interests of narrow specialists and museum workers. When the issue concerns tourism and heritage interpretation – the other key aspects of this study – it may be noted that certain gaps are at hand.

Both in the 20th century and today, the majority of publications relating to museums and museum work have a predominantly memoir, documentary or journalistic nature (Vasileva, 2019). During the period of socialist Bulgaria, a specialized magazine entitled “Museums and Monuments of Culture” (Museums and Monuments of Culture, n.d.) was published for a long period of time. Both then and today, there are, of course, scientific publications that look at models for the organization and management of the museum system, as well as those that compare the world experience with Bulgarian practices (Milanov, 1963; Milanov, 1967; Stancheva, 1980; Nedkov, 2006; Yordanova 2011; Boneva, Rusev 2017).

In regulatory terms, the activity of museums in Bulgaria was defined back in 1969 after a prolonged debate under the leadership of the Committee on Art and Culture. A Law on the Monuments of Culture and Museums was adopted, in which a special section was set to regulate the functions of museums, their tasks and territorial scope, as well as the mechanisms for the implementation of museum institutions management (Vasileva, 2019). This law, with some additions and amendments, continued to function until it was replaced by the Law on Cultural Heritage (2009) supplemented by the Law on Protection and Development of Culture (1999).

As for the review of the literature on museum and cognitive tourism, primarily in connection to heritage interpretation, such is missing in Bulgarian. This is an undeniable restriction for the specialists who should provide museum services (such as educational, information or tourist) as it is difficult for them to master the interpretation techniques and methods, as well as to use the impacts heritage interpretation can have on visitors in order to create a memorable experience for the users. All this reflects on the work of museums in their attempts to create innovative (for the Bulgarian practice) programs that would significantly improve their competitiveness and sustainability as institutes.

Of course, there is sufficient literature in foreign languages that could be used. Particularly valuable to understanding heritage interpretation are the works of Ted Cable, Larry Beck, Freeman Tilden, William Lewis, and Sam Ham, (Ham, 2009).

In the specifics of this study, it is important to note the definition of heritage interpretation by the National Association for Interpretation of the United States of America. It is directly related to the philosophy of this paper and the meaning of its conclusions, namely: “Interpretation is a process of communication based on a mission that builds emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent to the resource” (Ham, 2013).

By a reference, it is supplemented by the version explored by Rayna Pashova to emphasize the importance of communication, in connection with interpretation (in

tourism) as a process. The interpretation of a museum is regarded as a structured approach to communication and the transfer of significant ideas for certain exhibits to audiences (the society). As a result, cognitive and emotional connections are established between visitors and what they can find in the museum (Pashova, 2021).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to build the logical framework of the study, we have chosen a methodology which is tailored to the research purpose. Complex in nature, the methodological apparatus is primarily handled with quality methods. In particular, it includes a review of specialized publications on the topic, at the same time using the methods of observation, expert evaluation and synthesis. The basis, however, are the case study method and the toolkit of heritage interpretation.

The focus of attention is laid on outlining the effects of heritage interpretation when using an approach such as the case study applied to selected museums in Bulgaria and their museum practices and services. At the same time, in order for this methodological technique to be successful, it must first be clarified why it is applicable and appropriate. First of all, we have to underline the successes that world museums such as the British Museum, the Louvre, Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and others have achieved when using different variations of interpretation. Secondly, for its intended purpose, heritage interpretation is aimed at different groups of visitors and it therefore should follow an individual approach. According to Tilden (2008), heritage interpretation requires a separate program. The interpretative program has three main goals in general – educational, emotional and behavioural – by stimulating the interest of the audience to the site and encouraging visitors to return to this place once more and find something new on their own initiative (Tilden, 2008). In this sense, the development of concrete/specialized interpretative programs could be directly related to the creation of memorable experiences in the museum. And from here, to keeping the attention of current visitors, attracting new ones, strengthening sustainability and competitiveness.

The method of the case studies was developed as early as the 19th century at Harvard University. In ideological terms, it is influenced by the achievements of psychology, and although originally oriented towards the field of law, there is actually a broad applicability in various fields of science and practice (Popkochev, n.d.). This often leads to ambiguities or complexity, mainly due to the lack of complete and categorical definition. Of course, there is a universal basis which assumes that ‘case study’ actually means studying phenomena and processes based on specific situations. For this purpose, a sequence of actions is applied where the beginning is based on formulating a problem, analysis, solution and discussion of the situation, both modelled and real. Those for whom the particular case study is intended should analyze the situation, understand the essence of the problem, find possible solutions and choose the best of them (Serbezova, 2018). In fact, the method is highly adaptive and therefore could be placed in the present study within the framework of museum activities, serving as a good practice to follow and perceive in the work with visitors. An interesting point that must be emphasized is that one of the leading researchers of the method of case studies connects it to heritage interpretation. Working on the topic, Stake (2000) develops the idea that “Case studies

are useful in the study of human affairs because is they are down-to-earth and attention-holding”. Stake (1995) also believes that “The most important role of the case study researcher was that of interpreter”. His vision for this role is especially appropriate for the case of museums, as he speaks of clarifying the views and building clearer ideas about the site (in the case of research and interpretation) through explanations, descriptions and provision of integrated interpretations of situations and contexts.

### **3. BULGARIAN MUSEUMS AND HERITAGE INTERPRETATION**

The museums included in the current research were selected on the basis of their efforts and experience in the application of heritage interpretation to different aspects of their work.

#### **3.1. Regional Historical Museum of Blagoevgrad**

The Museum is part of the network of regional historical museums located in each of the 28 administrative districts of Bulgaria. Their task is to collect, research, store and communicate the valuable heritage – historical but also natural – of the corresponding district, providing at the same time methodological guidance and support for the smaller municipal museums on the territory. The Regional Historical Museum of Blagoevgrad was founded in 1952 and is in itself part of the socialist heritage of the town and the region of Southwest Bulgaria. It keeps a fund of over 100,000 individual pieces of heritage and has a specialized Nature Department.

In 2010, the RHM of Blagoevgrad became the first Bulgarian museum to open a designated Children’s Corner based entirely on the principles of heritage interpretation. It was the result of a small project funded by the America for Bulgaria Foundation and put to use one of the smaller meeting rooms at the museum. Repair works were carried out and interpretive modules were installed. Module 1 comprised of two parts – a large sand-box where models of bones from pre-historic animals were ‘buried’ and side boxes with various shapes where visitors could try to fit the bone they found in the sand and learn more about the anatomy of species that are now extinct. Module 2 showed the prehistoric agricultural field in which visitors had the chance to ‘plant’ seeds of the first crops man started to grow for food thousands of years ago, and see how they ‘grew’ and ‘gave fruit’ with the seasons. At Module 3, visitors were offered special stamps with footprints of various animals who lived in the prehistoric era; they could make ‘prints’ in boxes of plasticine and play a game to recognize the animal. Module 4 comprised a magnet board of a tree and boxes of various elements – leaves, blossoms, fruits, etc. – which visitors had to put in their right places depending on the season (spring, summer, autumn, winter). The Children’s Corner was complemented by a model of a prehistoric dwelling with ‘furniture’ and ‘appliances’. Each visitor could get dressed in a prehistoric costume and have a photo at the house, for example grounding wheat manually for flour.

Various interpretive programmes were developed for the Children’s Corner, together with external experts, students and friends of the museum. A small project, funded by the Culture Fund of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, for example, brought together

students from the Culture Department of the Faculty of Arts at the South-West University of Neofit Rilski in Blagoevgrad and experts in tourism and heritage interpretation from the association for sustainable tourism, Pirin Tourism Forum. They developed a series of interpretive programmes for children of different ages themed “The House”, “The Attire”, “The Décor” etc. Each programme included a set of games and other activities by which the participants could follow the evolution of the human dwellings or clothes through the consequent historical periods. All examples were based on sites and archaeological finds originating from the territory of Southwest Bulgaria covered by the RHM of Blagoevgrad.

This small interpretive center continues to evolve today. More programmes are being added almost every year, interrupted only by the global COVID-crisis. The Children’s Corner is appreciated by both youngsters and adults. Parents have the choice to leave their children at the museum for an hour and come pick them up but what actually happens very often is they stay and participate. The modules and programmes were planned to connect thematically the cultural and natural heritage of the area so there is something interesting and attractive for every visitor. The center has a separate ticket so can be visited alone. It hosts events with groups of students for special dates like Easter or the Earth Day, and it can be rented for private events like children’s birthdays which is a source of additional income for the museum.

### **3. 2. Regional Historical Museum of Shumen**

Shumen is located diagonally from Blagoevgrad across the country, in its northeast corner. Its Regional Historical Museum was officially established in 1904 as a token of patriotism but the current building dates from 1981 when there were mass celebrations for the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian State. The building expresses the same trends of socialist monumentalism as the RHM of Blagoevgrad and, until 2020, the expositions inside were materially and morally outdated. The legislation which governs museum work in Bulgaria has limitations some of which make it very difficult for museums to make changes to their permanent exhibitions. The making of new such exhibitions requires a process of minimum two years and the participation of a lot of administration so museums usually don’t go for this at all and rely on temporary expositions.

What the RHM in Shumen did in 2021 was not to change the approved exposition plan of its Prehistory and Antiquity Exhibitions but to change the presentation mode using new materials and the means of heritage interpretation. On the purely material side, they used polymers instead of heavy glass windows and multi-functional re-adjustable installations. On the conceptual side, the most important novelty was that the visitors could already be active instead of passive. A global problem of museums is the fact that tourists are treated merely as observers and listeners. Heritage interpretation puts the user in the focus, so visitor involvement is crucial for the quality of the experience and the learning-and-appreciation process about heritage. Each exhibition module at the Shumen RHM now includes a section of exhibits (some of them well-made replicas) which visitors can touch, hold in their hands, sometimes draw and even play games with.

A special children's corner in the exhibition hall offers youngsters a chance to learn some forgotten skills like loom-weaving and pottery-making and decoration.

The visitors can continue their museum experience on the second floor, at the section dedicated to Bulgarian renaissance handicrafts. Each craft is presented in a separate 'atelier' hosted behind a traditional façade from the 18th-19th century. In a designated interactive space at the exit from the hall, various activities are offered to the visitors such as handicrafts quiz, use of applied arts for production of personal souvenirs and others. The museum experts involved only local support for the renovation of the exhibitions so now the local community has ownership over the results, helping the museum institution to perform its other function of a center for local development.

### **3.3. Regional Historical Museum of Razgrad**

The greatest asset of the RHM in the town of Razgrad is the Roman city of Abritus. A central part of it has been excavated and socialized for tourist visits. For a better visitor experience, they added a modern construction of a watch tower, made to resemble the features and height of the actual defense tower that was once part of the city walls. In 2014, the Municipality of Razgrad won project funding from the EU through the Regional Development Operational Programme. They built a new interactive visitor center, called Abritus Museum, applying the principles and the toolkit of heritage interpretation.

The new museum is designed thematically from the very exterior, with making as many links to the Roman heritage as possible. Even the sanitary facilities are marked as 'Latrinae'. Inside, the space is divided into themed halls, e.g. Hall of Coins and Roman Market, Cities in the Roman World, Fashion in Abritus, etc. Visitors are welcomed to participate and learn about this precious heritage by playing games. There is a special children's room (Abritus for Children) but in practice all ages participate jointly in the activities. Visitors can learn the secret 'hand language' of negotiating prices at the Roman market by using gestures. They can try different Roman hair styles to see which one fits them better. They can take a photo in a Roman costume, build 3D puzzles of Roman arches or arrange mosaics from houses found in the ancient city. They can cut themselves a local Roman coin and play quizzes about the Roman heritage.

The Abritus Museum has inspired growth in visitor flows to the archeological site and all other sites of the Razgrad RHM. It has also inspired a programme of various thematic events. The Roman Festival of Ancient Abritus has been organized, with short interruptions caused by the COVID crisis, since 2015 with a more exciting programme each year. It takes three days and includes re-enactments of rituals from Ancient Rome, culinary tastings, sports contests and games, demonstrations of Roman fighting techniques, ancient military camp, theatrical and music performances, ancient crafts and costumes, etc. Naturally, the specialized modules of the programme are hosted by professionals but the whole local community takes part in the opening and closing parades before the Roman Emperor.

In 2022, for the first time the Razgrad RHM organized the interpretive programme entitled “A Day in Abritus”. It was aimed at schoolchildren and involved not only youngsters from local schools but from other cities too. The programme included creative workshops and contests to introduce participants to the life of Ancient Rome, e.g. treasure hunts, Roman board games, organizing a Roman market, dances and parades in Roman costumes and more. To involve all ages of the local community, the RHM also organizes regular White Nights at Abritus. Each year they present a new unique piece of heritage that have not been exhibited before to the general public of Razgrad and guests, open the doors of the sites till late at night and offer various cultural experiences. This tradition is much cherished by local people and it reinforces the role of the museum as a center of life and activity.

### **3.4. Regional Historical Museum of Vratsa**

The regional city center of Vratsa has one the best museum networks in Bulgaria, with a central socialist-heritage building exhibiting, among other valuables, one of the largest Thracian treasures ever discovered in Bulgarian lands – 165 pots of gilded silver. Close by is the National Revival Period (18th-19th century) complex of Sofroni Vrachanski with several ethnographic houses, exhibition of horse carriages and the first Renaissance school of the town. In recent years, the museum archaeologists have been carrying research and excavations at a very valuable Prehistoric site near the village of Ohoden, 24 km from the town of Vratsa. It is also the site of the Festival of Ancient Cultures – The Sun of Todorka.

The festival carries the name given by the archaeologists to a Prehistoric woman, aged 25 at the time of her passing, whose remains have been unearthed at the site and she presents the earliest European female ever found intact in her burial place. The festival which started as a two-day event has now grown to five days, and its entire aim is to inform, educate about and promote Prehistoric heritage in Bulgarian lands and this region in particular. It includes purely scientific sections such as conferences and debates but much attention is paid to the local community which must undertake the site as its own, and to visitors from Bulgaria and abroad. Applying the principles of heritage interpretation, the event has gained popularity and the last edition attracted participants from Russia, Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania and Albania.

The festival programme is rich in workshops where the public can participate actively and gain experiences and memories. One such workshop is the Path of Bread. It includes activities of harvesting spelt, which was consumed broadly by the Prehistoric man, using primitive tools. Next step is cleaning the seeds and crushing them to flour using stone plates. The flour is kneaded into dough and shaped into small loafs of bread which are baked on the heated stones of an open fireplace. Every visitor has the opportunity to make their own loaf. Another workshop is the Path of Clay. Visitors can hand-make their own pieces of pottery – pots, dolls, any forms of souvenirs – and then bake them in the pits full of embers prepared by the hosts. The festival always includes an Experimental Archaeology workshop where the participants can make excavations, learn how to dig precious finds, clean them and even set their approximate age.



The Sun of Todorka Festival of the Vratsa RHM demonstrates how heritage interpretation can be used to enliven, make attractive and market successfully even hard 'material' such as Prehistory. Prehistory is usually difficult to handle as a tourism resource since there is little left of the material culture of the people and there are almost no impressive ruins remaining – at least in Bulgarian lands. Vratsa RHM has shown that it is possible to shape a marketable tourism product out of this resource.

### **3.5. National Military History Museum of Bulgaria**

It is located in the capital of Sofia and is part of the structure of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense. The museum occupies a rather big space in the heart of the capital city, with two large buildings and big yards with open-air collections of war machines. The permanent exhibitions cover chronologically the military history of Bulgarian lands since ancient times and through the modern and contemporary periods. The museum funds comprise over 1,000,000 individual items of military heritage, including collectibles such as the personal weapons of famous men and women, and the military insignia of the Bulgarian presidents in their capacity of heads of the Bulgarian Army.

In the focus of this research fell one the temporary exhibitions of the NMHM which is being promoted even not as an exhibition but as an 'Experiential Space' entitled "The Scars of War". It is dedicated to a dramatic page of Bulgarian national history – the period when the country was part of the Nazi coalition during WWII and fell under the attacks of the Allies in the years 1941-1944. The experience is delivered to the visitor through several senses: vision, earsight and touch. The visitor follows generally dark spaces with lights on the exhibits that have to draw attention. Sound recordings of planes attacking and bombs exploding are carefully planned to add to the experience at the right moments. Stories of real people who shared their memories of these days were filmed by famous Bulgarian actors and actresses and are on display around the exhibition. Visitors can touch authentic objects from the same period – suitcases of refugees, personal belongings of Sofia citizens collected from under the ruins of bombed buildings. There is also a touch-screen where one can follow the routes of the attacking planes and make their own tourist trail around the capital, to see what these places look like in the present day.

The exhibition was opened as a temporary one before the start of the COVID crisis. It drew so much attention and visitors that it has remained in display for more than four years now. Museum curators say that they have never observed such a connection made between people and heritage and such emotions provoked by an exposition, with visitors searching to find more and asking for additional information. There has not been a notable difference between the various age groups or the different nationalities. Which confirms that the interpretation of heritage brings about a common language of appreciation, experience and understanding.

## CONCLUSION

One of the oldest cultural institutions in the world at all, museums have reached the present day performing the same underlying functions as ever – to search, collect, explore, study, keep and preserve the common heritage of humanity, at the same time sharing, educating, informing and genuinely promoting this heritage as widely as possible. Traditionally, they have done this by exhibiting samples or collections of heritage items and offering popular and specialized information about these exhibits.

In the 21st century, however, information flows differently and expectations of visitors change rapidly. Museums can no longer afford to stick to the tradition. If, by default, they are more visitor centers than scientific institutes, they need to act accordingly and adapt to the realities of modern tourism and the modern world as a whole. New ways of exhibiting heritage, with contemporary materials, layouts, lighting and re-arrangement of space are only the first step of a modern strategy for the re-transformation of museums into successful tourist sites. The next step is to establish a new line of communication with visitors, and this is where heritage interpretation steps in.

Freeman Tilden who is considered today the father of heritage interpretation describes it as an “educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 2008). Many consequent authors, however, see heritage interpretation as an approach to communication which makes it personal and meaningful (Ham, 1992). Heritage interpretation operates with a system of methods and tools which make it possible to translate scientific terminology and factual information about heritage to a language which is understandable to the broad audiences. In addition to the better understanding, interpretation creates experiences and memories which is what the modern visitor is looking for.

By applying and utilizing the principles and toolkit of heritage interpretation, museums can take their rightful place as successful tourism sites. This is obvious from the case studies presented in the current research. Bulgarian reality is similar to many other countries, especially the members of the united European family. The findings and conclusions made hereby can be relevant and useful to many other museums, heritage centers and specialized tourist attractions. The key to success is to always try to add value to the experiences of visitors, and heritage interpretation is a suitable mechanism to achieve that.

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**MARIA STANKOVA**, PhD, Professor  
South-West University of Neofit Rilski  
Faculty of Economics, Department of Tourism  
66, Ivan Mihaylov Str., 2700 Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria  
+359 886 757670  
mzlstan@yahoo.com

**SIMANA MARKOVSKA**, PhD Student  
South-West University of Neofit Rilski  
Faculty of Economics, Department of Tourism  
66, Ivan Mihaylov Str., 2700 Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria  
+359 887 912950  
simana.markovska@gmail.com