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CORONA VIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19) AND ITS EFFECT ON CULTURAL HERITAGE MUSEUMS. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ACROSS CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Abstract: The article seeks to compare the effects of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)-related lockdowns across the museums in Central and Eastern Europe. Although studies and research were conducted on the closure of museums European-wide by many European agencies and associations, they are mostly occupied with the negative results on the socialization of the cultural heritage rather than the budgetary effects on museums. Measuring the economic effect would better serve budgetary planning related to funding from the European Union, national and regional sources. The effect of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-2019) on the budgets of museums is sought to be estimated based on their lockdown period, the total lack of visitors during that time and the respective loss of entry fees. However, additional remarks on socialization are being presented by comparing the digital activity of selected national museums in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Poland.

Keywords: cultural heritage; Eastern Europe; coronavirus; museums.

Introduction

The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic led to the temporary closures of many museums worldwide which proved to be a substantial challenge for the socialization of the cultural artefacts stored by them as well as for the proper curatorial activity, given that most of the personnel was forced either to cease temporary their onsite activity or do it without the public involvement. That development brought forth many online initiatives which were aimed at preserving the socialization effort of the museums such as expanding the existing digital databases of heritage artefacts and the activities on their social media accounts, as well as starting virtual exhibitions, curatorial talks and virtual tours of their galleries via streaming platforms, and educational material for children and adults¹.

However, the lack of physical visitors had also budgetary implications for the museums as most of the digitalization activity was provided for free to the public and the digital activity and their COVID-related expansion were relatively new to the public. An ICOM (International Council of Museums) survey across museum professionals shows that “almost all museums around the world will reduce their activities because of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly one third of them will reduce staff, and more than one tenth may be forced to close permanently”². Thus, the income coming from physical visits plays a huge role in the overall budgets of museums. Its part in the overall museum budgets varies greatly depending on the popularity of the museum and to the cultural policy model of the hosting nation state.

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¹ **Zuanni, C.** Mapping museum digital initiatives during COVID-19, 2020. Available at: <https://pro.europeana.eu/post/mapping-museum-digital-initiatives-during-covid-19> [Accessed 18 10 2020]

² **ICOM.** Museums, museum professionals and COVID-19, s. l.: s.n., 2020.

Central and Eastern Europe

The museums of the Central and Eastern European Member States of the European Union rely in principle on less income from the visits being dependent on substantial subsidies from the national and regional budgets. This is in part valid due to the lower participation rates in comparison to Western and Northern European countries³. Additionally, Central and Eastern European experience historically less financing in comparison to their counterparts in the rest of the European Union. Another major factor was the change of the academic paradigm in those states from a very ideological one to a more liberal one, which created serious systemic challenge for the cultural sector. Thus, the performance of their response to the COVID-19 pandemic would be especially important for the European heritage management.

The analysis on the effects of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)-related lockdowns across the museums in Central and Eastern Europe would be made by a brief comparison across a sample of four nation states from the region: Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Poland. Thus it would cover two sub-regions – the Balkans and Central Europe and two visible models – centralized and mostly publicly financed in the case of Hungary and decentralized and mostly private in the case of Poland. It is based on the previous research on Bulgarian museums, which summarizes that the closure of the latter may result in roughly 3,(3)% decrease of their total income per 2020, given that they have been closed for the period 13.03.–13.05.2020⁴.

Initially, a brief comparison of the cultural heritage models of the countries should be revised, or more specifically, those related to the direct effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the limitations imposed by the availability of reliable and systemized statistics those would be the reliance of national museums on public and/or private funding, reliance on foreign tourism and the free admissions to the total of visits.

Poland

The Polish model of museum management adopts a substantial amount of private museums (see Table 1), which is more vulnerable during the pandemic as it relies predominantly on budgetary contributions from admission fees. Additionally, the cultural heritage sector is substantially decentralized which may pose risks to the uniform and timely response due to the organizational capacity of the regional actors⁵. However, the fraction of free admissions in Poland is quite high, around 40% of the total admissions (see Table 2), which may soften the effect of the decreased influx of visitors.

Table 1. Number of museums breakdown per ownership type in Poland

	Total	State	Local	Other public	Private
2003	665	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2005	690	57	488	N/A	113
2009	774	59	519	67	129
2010	782	54	547	181	117
2011	777	61	558	168	95
2014	844	62	581	52	149
2015	926	75	603	64	184
2016	944	76	605	70	193
2017	949	78	612	63	196

Source: retrieved from EGMUS/Country statistics
https://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/

³ Eurostat, 2017. Culture statistics – cultural participation. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Culture_statistics_-_cultural_participation [Accessed 18 10 2020]

⁴ Vasilev, V. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a stress test of the cultural heritage management system of Bulgaria based on the effect on museum visits. Sociobrain, Issue 69, pp. 103–106, 2020

⁵ Compedium. Cultural policies and trends. Organisational organigram. Poland, 2015, Available at: <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/database/search-by-country/country-profile/category/?id=30&g1=1> [Accessed 19 10 2020]

Table 2. Admission types in Poland

	Total	Free admissions	Percentage of the total
2005	18488000	N/A	N/A
2009	20655000	7098000	34,36
2010	22216000	8368000	37,60
2011	2491000	9121000	36,60
2014	24918000	13699800	45,00
2015	33271294	14771292	44,00
2016	36081555	13749059	38,00
2017	36081555	14247066	38,00

Source: retrieved from EGMUS/Country statistics
https://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/

Hungary

Hungary could be regarded as the opposite of Poland in the sample as it has less private museums with the exception of the religious monuments which are governed by the respective denominations (see Table 3) and it deploys highly centralized governance structure⁶. In that respect Hungary would be better suited to cope with the effects of the pandemic in terms of finance and management capacity, however, the high reliance of foreign tourist for the admission visits poses serious systemic risk due to the limitations on international travel (see Table 4).

Table 3. Number of museums breakdown per ownership type in Hungary

	Total	State-owned	Local/regional	NGOs	Private, incl. church
2002	661	14	595	38	14
2008	671	96	503	6	66
2012	734	29	548	128	6
2013	752	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2014	750	124	490	33	103
2015	743	124	474	38	107
2016	745	113	485	36	111
2017	737	107	483	32	115
2018	732	104	476	N/A	152

Source: retrieved from EGMUS/Country statistics
https://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/

Table 4. Total admissions and breakdown for Hungarian museums

	Total admissions (percentage of population)	Free admissions	Percentage of total	Foreigner admissions	Percentage of total
2018	10.955.141	4.042.693	36,90	2.215.182	20,22
2017	10.781.646	3.964.013	36,76	2.224.745	20,63
2016	10.395.847	4.115.153	39,58	1.961.195	18,86
2015	9.563.281	3.813.724	39,87	1.846.241	19,30
2014	9.557.052	3.733.891	39,06	1.755.178	18,36
2013	9.133.600	3.809.182	42,00	1.675.625	18,00

⁶ **Compedium.** Cultural policies and trends. Organisational organigram. Hungary, 2016. Available at: <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/database/search-by-country/country-profile/category/?id=18&g1=1> [Accessed 19 10 2020]

2012	8.372.374	3.187.590	38,10	1.596.015	20,00
2008	10.123.438	4.416.600	43,60	1.583.643	15,60

Source: retrieved from EGMUS/Country statistics
https://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/

Romania

The governance model of Romania is still developing. It is turning into a more decentralized one with the involvement of more private museums (see Table 5). The transition poses a risk to the proper functioning of the museums itself, thus a poor response to the pandemic could be expected. Additionally, Romania experiences the lowest participation rates of the public to the museum activities across the sample and the lack of systematic statistics on cultural heritage suppose lower management capacity.

Table 5. Ownership and admission data for Romanian museums

	Number of museums	State-owned	Local	Private	Total visits	Free visits
2000	519	N/A	N/A	N/A	1615000	N/A
2002	548	N/A	N/A	N/A	11114000	N/A
2005	742	N/A	N/A	57	27111604	667804
2006	742	N/A	N/A	57	2711604	667804
2007	748	787	568	94	3633443	995548
2008	688	N/A	N/A	N/A	10687056	N/A
2009	694	N/A	N/A	N/A	10169087	N/A
2010	687	N/A	N/A	N/A	8900425	N/A
2011	709	N/A	N/A	N/A	9527938	N/A
2012	663	N/A	N/A	N/A	10076330	N/A
2013	750	N/A	N/A	82	10927765	4015800
2014	739	73	577	89	10823706	3374600
2015	738	74	574	90	13051886	4106357
2016	761	77	592	92	14196944	3954295
2017	762	74	593	92	15940666	3759380
2018	787	76	585	104	17610029	3621158

Source: retrieved from EGMUS/Country statistics
https://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian model of museum governance resemble that of Hungary. The sector is highly centralized⁷ and deploys mostly publicly owned museums. Further, it presents similar numbers for free admissions at museums as well as for reliance on foreign tourists (see Table 6) with the difference being mainly in the lower participation rate of the population in Bulgaria and additionally having access to lower amounts of public funding⁸. Thus, the response in Bulgaria could be expected to be less favorable than that in Hungary.

⁷ **Compedium.** Cultural policies and trends. Organisational organigram. Bulgaria, 2020. Available at: <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/database/search-by-country/country-profile/category/?id=6&g1=1> [Accessed 19 10 2020]

⁸ **EGMUS. Statistics, 2020.** Available at: <https://www.egmus.eu/en/statistics/> [Accessed 19 10 2020]

Table 6. Number of museums visits in Bulgaria: total, percentage of population, free admissions and visits of foreigners

	Total admissions (percentage of population)	Free admissions	Percentage of total	Foreigner admissions	Percentage of total
2005	3.925.178(50.7)	N/A	N/A	971.747	24,80
2007	4.059.799(53)	N/A	N/A	960.142	23,60
2008	4.631.338(60.7)	1.714.323	37,00	1.136.633	24,50
2009	4.372.665(57.6)	1.610.557	36,80	870.861	19,90
2010	4.252.993(56.4)	1.002.162	23,60	868.436	20,40
2011	4.210.660(63.9)	725.351	17,20	840.637	20,00
2012	4.105.948(66.2)	801.979	19,50	830.087	20,20
2013	4.643.600(66.4)	879.468	18,90	782.292	16,80
2014	4.781.368(73.4)	763.692	16,00	792.329	16,60
2015	4.763.472(72.2)	1.246.561	26,20	737.642	15,50
2016	5.229.606(73.4)	1.222.540	23,40	1.008.888	19,30
2017	5.109.135(72.2)	1.221.005	23,90	1.112.496	21,80

Source: retrieved from EGMUS/Country statistics
https://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/

Museum visits

The museums in Hungary were closed due to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) for the period 17.03.–27.06.2020⁹. For the simplicity of analysis, 101 days would be excluded from the total visits per annum from museums notwithstanding seasonal fluctuation of the visits in previous years and the possibly decreased visits still resulting from the pandemic. Thus, the average drop of visits would be 101/365 of the total normal visits per year. As base year for the analysis would be taken year 2017 with visits statistics used from EGMUS¹⁰. Given that the visits for that year were providing 13.658.262 Euro of the total income for the total museums income of 298.810.326 Euro, the decrease of the total budgets per year for the Hungarian museums would be slightly more than 1% on a yearly basis.

As the data on visits and the income spamming from the entrance fees paid by the visitors in Romania and Poland is not as detailed as the data from Bulgaria and Hungary, an additional level of analysis on the drop of museum visitors could be drawn from Google Statistics and its COVID-19 report. Based on the activity being shared by customers through their mobile applications, Google compared the fluctuations of the visits they made in different types of locations. As a base value for the analysis the mean of every week day for the 5-week period between 03.01.–06.02.2020.

The report reveals that for Bulgaria up until 17.08.2020, the tendency of Google application customers to visit locations such as restaurants, theme parks, malls, museums, libraries and cinemas (the broader category which includes museums) has increased with +11%¹¹. For the same period and sample,

⁹ **Hungary Today, 2020.** Available at: <https://hungarytoday.hu/coronavirus-museum-of-fine-arts-national-gallery-to-close/> [Accessed 02 08 2020] and Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO), 2020. Available at: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=17-4zW7VeebnCetu54fNo-wukxY6KcrgG&ll=47.16249400000001%2C19.503304100000012&z=8> [Accessed 02 08 2020]

¹⁰ European Group on Museum Statistics, EGMUS, 2020. [Online] Available at: https://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/z/2/ [Accessed 05 08 2020]

¹¹ **Google, 2020.** <https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility/>. Available at: https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-08-17_BG_Mobility_Report_bg.pdf [Accessed 22 08 2020]

the visits in Hungary have increased with +10%¹², in Romania they have decreased with -2%¹³ and in Poland they have increased with +13%¹⁴.

Digital presence

Additionally, as argued by Towse, even if museums are not providing constant changes to their exhibitions and collections, additional programs and techniques providing enhanced experience could contribute to sustaining or even enlarging the audience¹⁵. That, extrapolated to the COVID-19-related lockdown, would mean that the museums should be especially focused on their digital presence. Furthermore, some scholars even argue that providing online access to cultural heritage is an obligation of the European museums, given that the right of cultural participation of every citizen is guaranteed by various international and European legal texts¹⁶. The following evaluation is similar to the framework for analysis of the online activity increase of museums during the COVID-19 lockdowns already established¹⁷.

As already presented by Vasilev, in Bulgaria the National Museum of Ethnography has not substantially improved nor widened its digital presence while the National Museum of History and especially the National Institute for Archaeology with Museum have increased their digital presence considerably¹⁸.

In Romania, the website of the National Museum of History of Romania is available only in Romanian, which subsequently deprives non-Romanian speakers and the increasing amount of foreign visitors from experiencing the local cultural heritage. The same finding applies to its virtual database. Even though the digitalization of the stored cultural heritage artefacts presents substantial development, the description of the objects consists of only name, inventory number and basic metric dimensions¹⁹. The National Village Museum “Dimitrie Gusti” presents semi-populated English version of its website, substantial digitalization of its database as well as increased recent activity on Instagram and Facebook, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic²⁰.

In Hungary, the Museum of Ethnography is closed since before the COVID-19 outbreak due to the moving to another building, but it is still virtually substantially active²¹. The Hungarian National Museum is the most active museum across the sample, with the strongest Facebook and Instagram presence and the most populated virtual artefact database²².

¹² **Google**, 2020. <https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility/>. Available at: https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-08-17_HU_Mobility_Report_en.pdf [Accessed 22 08 2020]

¹³ **Google**, 2020. <https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility/>. Available at: https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-08-17_RO_Mobility_Report_en.pdf [Accessed 22 08 2020]

¹⁴ **Google**, 2020. <https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility/>. Available at: https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-08-17_PL_Mobility_Report_en.pdf [Accessed 22 08 2020]

¹⁵ **Towse, R.** A Textbook of Cultural Economics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 as cited by Vasilev, V. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a stress test of the cultural heritage management system of Bulgaria based on the effect on museum visits. *Sociobrain*, Issue 69, pp. 103–106, 2020.

¹⁶ **Kuźelewska, E. T. M.** European Human Rights Dimension of the Online Access to Cultural Heritage in Times of the COVID-19 Outbreak. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law – Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique*, pp. 1–2, 2020.

¹⁷ **Agostino, D., Arnaboldi, M. & Lampis, A.** Italian state museums during the COVID-19 crisis: from onsite closure to online openness. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, pp. 1–11, 2020 and **Vasilev, V.** Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a stress test of the cultural heritage management system of Bulgaria based on the effect on museum visits. *Sociobrain*, Issue 69, pp. 103–106, 2020.

¹⁸ **Vasilev, V.** Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a stress test of the cultural heritage management system of Bulgaria based on the effect on museum visits. *Sociobrain*, Issue 69, pp. 103–104, 2020.

¹⁹ National Museum of History of Romania, 2020. Available at: <https://www.mnir.ro/> [Accessed 22 08 2020]

²⁰ National Village Museum “Dimitrie Gusti”, 2020. Available at: <https://muzeul-satului.ro/en/> [Accessed 22 08 2020]

²¹ **Museum of Ethnography**, 2020. Available at: <https://www.neprajz.hu/en> [Accessed 22 08 2020]

²² **Hungarian National Museum**, 2020. Available at: <https://mnm.hu/> [Accessed 22 08 2020]

In Poland, the Polish History Museum shows substantial digitalization development in connection with Google tools and applications and it is quite active with regular posts on Facebook and Instagram (Polish History Museum, 2020). The National Archaeology Museum of Poland is having its building renovated since 01.10.2018, however, in contrast to the Hungarian Ethnographic Museum it is not even present online and its virtual collection is not accessible online. The website is further not being updated (National Archaeology Museum, Warsaw, 2020). At last, the National Ethnographic Museums of Poland is not present online.

Conclusion

The analysis on the effects of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)-related lockdown across the museums in Central and Eastern Europe could conclude in terms of museum budgets that the Hungarian museums are the ones least affected, primarily because of their over-reliance on state subsidies. Given that the museums in Poland are known for being mostly private, they are most affected in financial matters but the recovery of visits shown by indirect Google data is the strongest across the sample. Bulgaria demonstrates substantial budgetary reliance on the state, as well as development of the digital activities of its museums, with strong recovery of physical visits. Romania on the other side, is lagging in both visit recovery as well as in electronic presence.

However, as there are clear positive and negative examples of museums coping with the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – related lockdowns across the Central and Eastern Europe, with Hungary the leader and Romania the most endangered example, sound conclusion could not be made given the lack of reliable data. Analysis is hampered not only by the lack of relevant datasets as in visits and the proportion of entry fees of the total budgets of national museums but also given the time frame of estimation of the COVID-19-related developments.

Further, the pandemic may lead to positive developments in the museums across the sample of nation states. The influx of visitors may become better planned and become enhanced, relying more on the quality of the museum experience rather than the quantity of visits. A development like that could increase the median ticket price but at the same time could sustain the income from attendance and increase the cultural participation of the general population. The increased digitalization and online activity is already a visible positive example of how the crisis could bring forth productive changes.

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