

EVENTS THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EVIDENCE FROM EUROPE

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EVENTS THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
EVIDENCE FROM EUROPE

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FRONT COVER

European Capital of Culture – Wrocław 2016. Opening ceremony.
(Wrocław Official Flickr)

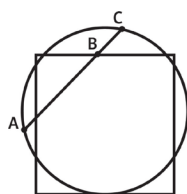
BACK COVER

Salamon Brück House, Timisoara, Romania.
(Turbojet, 2016, Wikimedia Commons)

LAYOUT AND COVER DESIGN

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Heritage Opportunities/threats within Mega-Events in Europe:

Changing environments, new challenges and possible solutions for
preservation in mega-events embedded in heritage-rich European cities



Events through the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from Europe

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Kraków,
September 2021



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Opposite page: Ancient Eleusis (source: Christina Gkioka, 2016, Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

The reason behind the report

The beginning of 2020 abruptly stopped what had been a booming industry all over the world – events and festivals. Whether defined as mega events or smaller-scale actions, in the field of culture, recreation, or sport, they brought important social and economic benefits to hosting cities. As always, there has also been the other side of the coin, namely potential inconveniences and threats posed by organising large-scale events, particularly in historic cities. The HOMEE project, within which this report was prepared, has been analysing both opportunities and threats posed by introducing large events, especially European Capitals of Culture, into heritage-rich cities.

“*The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the event industry all over the world. New event strategies, especially in heritage-rich cities, can benefit from the Charter for Mega-Events in Heritage-Rich Cities.*

As the COVID-19 pandemic has been changing the event landscape of the world, the HOMEE research team could not ignore the new situation and decided to prepare an overview of the problems faced by event organisers and strategies employed to overcome them. The aim of this report is, then, to complement the research done on mega-events and contribute to the discussion on how to organise events in post-pandemic historic cities, also using the recommendations of [the Charter for Mega-Events in Heritage-Rich Cities](#), the final output of the HOMEE project. If what has been said by many cultural organisers (that the pandemic and lockdowns provided an opportunity to re-think the way they operate) is true, we argue that the recommendations of the Charter might prove to be a useful tool for new event strategies in heritage-rich cities.

Some initial statistics on cancellations and postponements

One of the most obvious challenges faced by event organisers has been a permanent state of uncertainty as to not only their personal health safety but the safety of their audiences, as well as lockdown restrictions and their length, types of necessary event precautions, etc. In the first months of 2020 there was hope that many events could be postponed to autumn 2020 or 2021. A survey conducted by the European Festivals Association (2020) and the Budapest Observatory shows that only one fifth of the festivals were planned as before while 67% of them were postponed (see Fig. 1). At the same time 3,916 fairs and exhibitions worldwide were either cancelled or postponed¹.

Between March and June 2020 over 70% of the managers decided to close their World Heritage Sites, resulting in almost 90% of the sites not being accessible to the public². In May 2020 90% of the museums were also closed³. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Prime

1 Expodatabase 2020.
2 UNESCO 2020.
3 UN News 2020.

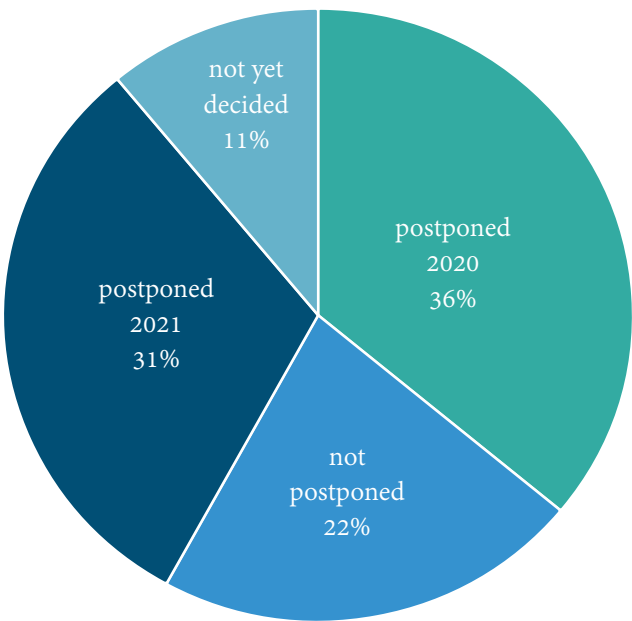


Fig. 1 Postponement of festivals (survey April-May 2020). Source: European Festivals Association, 2020, p. 6.

Minister of Japan decided to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics till 2021 (23.07 – 8.08.2021), which was an unprecedented situation in the history of modern Olympic Games. Also, the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) postponed the Expo 2020 Dubai to 2021 (1.10.21 – 31.03.22). These are just a few examples of the pandemic's direct impact on the event industry all over the world. Further consequences at both economic and social levels are yet to be researched in detail. What has been discovered so far is not inducing much optimism. Estimations were made that the turnover of music and performing arts industries, i.e., these domains of the cultural sector that are most closely connected with events, dropped by 76% and 90% respectively in comparison with 2019⁴. Statista's research department published results of a survey conducted among US firms organising live events which show that the majority of them did not expect their business to reach pre-pandemic levels before 2022. 30% of the respondents indicated 2024 or even later as a likely time for their activities to recover⁵.

The methodology

The findings presented in the report are based on the literature and press review, statements, and arguments provided by experts in the field during numerous webinars, as well as in-depth interviews with event organisers (six interviews conducted between July and October 2020). They are supported by information collected during the Charter validation workshops (five workshops) with event organisers, policy makers, and other Charter stakeholders that took place first in April and then in November and December 2020. Unlike most of the HOMEE research publications, this report focuses not only on cultural mega-events⁶ but also on smaller (in terms of size and duration) festivals that are organised across cities in existing spaces and venues and can claim significant impact on the hosting city. This evidence-based report presents a snapshot of the current situation of the event landscape and possible implications of COVID-19 for event organisers.

4 Lhermitte et al. 2021, p. 6.

5 Statista 2021.

6 Cultural mega events can be defined as: Capital/City of Culture programmes as well as other major events with a cultural focus that are carried out over a longer period of time (up to one year), which are typically spread out across host cities and tend to rely upon existing spaces, venues, and facilities. For more information on how the HOMEE project defines various categories used, see [Glossary in the Charter for Mega-events in Heritage-rich Cities](#).

Before COVID-19

Positive and negative impacts of events. Short overview

An increasing number of events and festivals as well as their participants (as shown below) all over the world has been fuelled by the experience economy⁷, a concept which acknowledges that experiences and the memory are as valuable as the purchase of a material objects. The rise of the festivals is equally linked to the concept of a creative city⁸, within which culture shapes the industry, the economy, and image of the place. Based on a literature review Getz⁹ distinguishes three main discourses on festival cities. These are:

- discourse on the roles, meanings, and impacts of festivals in society and culture,
- discourse on festival tourism,
- and discourse on festival management.

The first one includes discussion on the celebration – spectacle in the anthropological sense – but also it touches upon issues such as group identity, the social and cultural impacts of festivals, social capital, and the preservation of traditions. The second one centres on themes such as the commodification of culture, place marketing, attracting tourists, and other economic impacts of the festivals, treating a festival as a crucial means of local development. Discourse on festival management is the most recent and follows the questions of event practitioners' points of view pertaining to the practical side of the event organisation such as strategic planning, marketing, and risks.

Until the crisis caused by COVID-19, festivals and other cultural events had been growing both in numbers and scale. Equally, festivals have enjoyed a steady growth in the number of participants. For example, in Poland, the total number of artistic/ entertainment mass events' participants (including festival audiences), rose from 8 to 12 million in

7 Pine & Gilmore 2011.

8 Landry 2000.

9 2010, p. 5-6.

just six years (Tab. 1), and the total number of music shows almost doubled in the period of 10 years in France (Tab. 2).

Tab.1 The increase in the total number of participants in artistic/entertainment mass events in Poland, 2013-2019. Source: Local Data Bank, Statistics Poland.

2013	8,047,123
2014	9,116,183
2015	9,426,909
2016	10,480,542
2017	10,772,304
2018	12,630,504
2019	12,361,718

Tab. 2 Number of performances of entertainment shows and contemporary music in France, 2007-2017. Source: Wolff 2020, p. 22.

	Total	Paid entry performances	Free admission performances
2007	39,640	34,331	5,309
2008	40,317	34,094	6,223
2009	40,496	34,963	5,533
2010	44,860	38,813	6,047
2011	50,868	43,693	7,175
2012	55,608	48,415	7,193
2013	58,376	51,083	7,293
2014	62,366	55,436	6,930
2015	64,716	58,216	6,500
2016	70,269	63,339	6,930
2017	73,056	65,420	7,636

The main approach to the problem of events has been to claim that cultural events and festivals trigger local economies by raising levels of investments, consumption, income, and employment. Moreover, events make a significant contribution to the global tourism industry¹⁰. They are said to be the source of creativity and the tool to unleash the creative potential which positions the city as an innovative, creative, and vibrant centre of growth¹¹. Cultural festivals have been playing an important role in urban settings by fostering urban rehabilitation, accumulating new

10 Chacko & Schaffer 1993, p. 475–482.

11 Prentice, Andersen, 2003, p. 7-30.

external funds for the construction of new infrastructure, and allowing a shift towards the reuse of neglected spaces, among which many are of historical value. What is more, they bring changes to the image of the city, raising its international profile. In short, events have been treated by local governments as a stimulus for local economies and urban renewal. However, the positive effects of festivals are difficult to measure, which is partly linked to data shortage as data is collected in too general a manner and suffer from other economic assessment problems¹².

“The events industry size was valued at \$1,135.4 billion in 2019 and was expected to reach \$1,552.9 billion by 2028, registering a CAGR¹³ of 11.2% from 2021 to 2028¹⁴.

	Output	Jobs
Edinburgh (UK) (2015)	GBP 290 million (Edinburgh)	5660 full-time equivalent jobs (Edinburgh)
	GBP 313 million (Scotland)	6021 full-time equivalent jobs (Scotland)
Kraków 4 music festivals (PL) (2017)	PLN 19.9 million (Kraków)	
	PLN 24.8 million (Poland)	
17 major festivals members of Rémi in Quebec (CA) (2016- 2017)	CAD 290.8 million (Quebec)	4606 full-time equivalent jobs

Tab. 3 Examples of the economic impact of selected events.Source: BOP Consulting 2016, p. 20; Chrzanowski 2017, p. 86; KPMG 2018, p. 8.

Besides the economic impact of festivals, there are a variety of ways to consider their social benefit. The diversity of events facilitates an effort to prepare activities suited for every audience, and the abundance of the cultural offer has become important. Festivals have created new cultural values and provoked changes in the participants’ perceptions of the world. Festivals often fuel the discussion on socially important issues such as human rights or minorities. They

12 UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2015, p. 20.

13 Compound Annual Growth Rate

14 Alliedmarketresearch, 2021.

can also set an example by introducing ecological and ethical solutions such as recycling measures or use of green energy.

Events have become open to assure active participation of the audience in the co-creation of culture. Festivals and other cultural events pertain to one's identity and sense of belonging; they have a pivotal role in building social cohesion and civil engagement. In many cases event organisers have taken steps to assure the inclusivity of the local community, mobilising, among others, volunteers¹⁵.

“Among positive impacts of events, we can list an increase in the number of jobs and revenue, attracting investments, and changing a city brand, as well as community building and social and human capital growth.

Cultural events bring both a growth in jobs in the cultural sector and its professionalisation, introducing them to new challenges and opportunities. The cultural sector has gained new skills in audience development and marketing. In addition, the sector has moved closer to the professionalization of assessment and evaluation methods, as was the case of the Edinburgh Festivals¹⁶, which allows the sector to comment on the values conveyed by festivals.

The positive impact events can bring notwithstanding, much attention is also paid to potential negative effects. While events have become a tool of development strategies, they have simultaneously become an act of politics, driven by the local agents of interests and power. Thus, the politicisation of cultural narrative is cited as one of the potential side effects of events. Events – noticeably those of a mass-event connotation – create a momentum for a great influx of money into the cultural sector. The costs of certain festivals are comparable to those generated by large sporting events¹⁷. There are complaints that such large budgets consume a greater part of the public cultural spending, but their effects are not visible in the long term.

15 Garcia & Cox 2013, p. 95.

16 BOP Consulting 2016.

17 Ponzini et al. 2019, p. 16.

As a driving force for economic changes in the city, cultural events and festivals might lose their cultural integrity and be considered more of an economic tool than a cultural phenomenon. It is pointed out that if events are to be an important showcase of culture and creativity, the problem of authenticity of the cultural activity should be resolved¹⁸. As events find ways to monetise culture for tourism and entertainment ends, it can lead to a disruption of traditional lifestyles and homogenising the culture in order to meet the expectation of wider audiences. The dangers of festivalisation of public spaces include deterioration of these spaces due to tourism, crime, congestion, traffic, and gentrification, as well as uneven distribution of benefits derived from the event.

“*There is also evidence of potential threats brought on by events, including politicization of cultural narratives, festivalisation of culture and public space, and gentrification.*”

It is, however, important to emphasise that the phenomena described above do not apply equally to all events due to their great variety in terms of not only size and duration but also formats and methods of organisation and management. Events may differ in terms of their topic, organisers, location (indoor, outdoor, virtual, hybrid), reach (local, regional, national, supranational, global), scale, or duration. There is a considerable variety of their resilience potential, related to their popularity, budgets, and the cultural policy of the city where they are located.

18 Bankston & Henry 2000.

In the pandemic

Different strategies to live through the pandemic

The spread of the COVID-19 virus in the beginning of 2020 resulted in shutting down the event industry all over the world. By the end of March 2020 this diverse and broad sector simply had to close, with cultural, sporting, and business events being suspended and almost all their activities and projects either cancelled or postponed (see the introduction).

At the beginning there was wishful thinking about the temporariness of the restrictions imposed to stop the virus. “It will last up to 3 months” was frequently said. With restrictions loosening in the summer 2020, some small events, mainly outdoor, took place. However, the increase in infections in autumn resulted in new restrictions on the organisation of cultural activities and the closure of cultural institutions. Large events were further postponed to 2021 or even 2022. At that time the concept of returning waves of the epidemic appeared, with a substantial need for their control (loosening restrictions followed by periodical introduction of lockdowns) and a vaccination programme. Many thought then that the pandemic would continue for a maximum of another year. Especially, the introduction of vaccines at the turn of 2020 and 2021 gave rise to hopes that the pandemic situation would be dealt with quickly. Local restrictions, however, have not ceased. New variants of the virus have become a problem; the process of vaccinating citizens has not been progressing quickly enough; there are considerable differences in the level of vaccination in individual countries. Now we are told that the pandemic will last – according to optimistic analysts’ forecasts – for at least two more years and, in fact, it should be treated as a permanent element of the economy and, consequently, cultural activities and the event industry.

Tourism and events

Tourism as an economic sector has very strong links with the cultural sector – events are the attractors and an important part of the tourism experience. Cities and regions in different parts of the world form a very complex ecosystem of connections between tourism and the cultural, creative, and heritage sectors. Tourists constitute a very large group of recipients of culture. Furthermore, events have significant promotional value related to attracting tourists and the development of the economy based on global mobility.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant decrease in tourist traffic in Europe, especially in urban tourism related to participation in cultural events, visiting monuments, tourism related to the "city break" format, conventions and congresses, and sporting events. The status of tourism in 2020 can be presented in several figures: 60% to 90% reduction in bookings compared to similar periods in previous years, significant estimated loss of revenue (85% for hotels and restaurants; 85% for tour operators; 85% for long distance rail; 90% for cruises and airlines)¹⁹.

The level of uncertainty associated with planning tourist trips caused a massive reduction in tourism, which directly resulted in the collapse of the economy associated with tourist services (accommodation, catering, organising business meetings, tourist attractions, and transport), the disappearance of jobs, and interruption of supply chains and cooperation. This situation also strongly affects event organisers. Events had been an attractor and an important accelerator for tourist trips; now this relation and balance has vanished.

The administrative restrictions related to the pandemic have stopped organisation of all types of sport, business, cultural, and artistic events, and at least in the near future there will still be limits on the number of participants. The risk of COVID-19 will remain a decisive factor in operating/delivering events and a risk factor for tourist journeys for a long time. The organisation of congresses, festivals, conferences, and cultural and sporting events will probably be significantly limited.

A growing number of reports indicate permanent changes happening in business tourism and the organisation of corporate events. For example, Skift Research and McKinsey claimed that "travel for major industry events and conferences might be the last to return"²⁰. Physical venues (generating tourist traffic) have been relocating to online solutions. Increasingly professional web applications that can transfer an entire congress experience to the online network well illustrate this point. For business, this constitutes a major benefit and possibility of savings on expenses. However, as a result Europe may experience substantial changes in business meetings and business tourism which constitute the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions) sector.

¹⁹ European Commission 2020.

²⁰ 2020, p.39.

Experts' answers to the following question keep changing: When will we return to "normal", and what will that new "normal" be? Will this normality include a significant reduction of interpersonal contacts, changes in mobility and tourism, the growing importance of indirect solutions (remote work; online platforms)? All to keep the virus under control, using restrictions that ensure safety in case of the virus mutations. This may take several more years, and there is also a risk of a relapse based on completely new variants of the virus.

Event organisers deal with the problem by introducing several different solutions or strategies, mostly involving more online engagement of the audience. In the field of sport, many events take place without an audience, and sport competitions are subjected to a strict epidemiological regime. Sporting events are able to work in this model thanks to the role of streaming and television broadcasting, which in fact have been a major source of income for some time now. For example, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games took place without an audience (and certainly without tourists from outside of Japan)²¹.

“*Cultural event organisers choose either to wait for “normality” and postpone their events or to try the virtual alternative. The most common approach seems to be, however, an attempt to combine on-site and online activities in a hybrid event.*

In the business area, in the organisation of conferences and congresses, the transfer of on-site solutions to online was carried out with a great success. New web applications for meetings, conferences, fairs, and exhibitions were created, and we can participate in them from behind our desks at home²². After the loosening of pandemic restrictions hybrid versions (partly on-site, partly online) have begun to emerge.

21 It does not mean that there is no economic loss, especially at the local level (Coster 2021), not to mention a social and cultural one as well as an impact on the athletes themselves.

22 Reed Exhibitions 2020.

The cultural sector efforts to survive the pandemic align with the above solutions. On one hand, cultural event organisers try to develop a virtual side of their events; on the other, they either postpone the events (waiting for “normality”)

or, more often, organise them for a reduced number of attendees under the sanitary restrictions imposed at the time of the event.

There is also a third approach – so-called hybrid events, streamed online live or recorded for later public access on an Internet platform, with a significantly reduced number of artists on stage and people in the audience, in accordance with the local rules of physical distancing.

Video on Demand (VoD) and streaming solutions have become new hearts for cultural events, in many cases. Organisers of events related to the physical presence of the audience switched their activities to recording and broadcasting them in virtual media. With the audience becoming increasingly accustomed to having access to culture at the click of a mouse, streaming and VoD platforms raised and possibly stabilised their importance. The urge to be visible and accessible online is evident. Many congress, conference, and cultural venues have become places for recording concerts, performances, and other art events (thanks to their large and safe spaces).

It should be stressed that this model is not for everyone. Often it is a rescue mode that allows the audience's interest to be kept but with no real chance for economic return. This strategy can be observed more frequently among public sector event organisers, who have secure public funding. Moreover, local authorities have been seen helping to implement the virtual presence of cultural events. This was the case with PLAY KRAKÓW platform, a first municipal VoD service for cultural events in Poland, which has hosted several Kraków festivals since its launch in September 2020.

In the private sector activities are rather undertaken to minimise costs and seek other sources of financing outside the culture and art industry. The revival of events depends on two issues: cancelling the pandemic restrictions – the goal for the organisers is to implement profitable or financially balanced projects – and the audience's willingness to participate in the post-pandemic events bearing in mind

that their needs and expectations have possibly changed. In the latter case the organisers must be prepared to make adaptive changes.

As for specific events, the strategy of dealing with online solutions or cancellation very much depends on at least several factors: the status of the epidemic, the risk of cancellation and losing preparation costs, the development of a new financing model for online distribution, and the type of event – since certain cultural phenomena are better suited to be transferred to the online solutions (e.g., film festivals). This difference is mainly based on the importance of being directly, personally at the event. Certain events are related to physical presence, such as outdoor music festivals. Festivals are a place of meetings and fun that cannot be replaced with an internet connection. Other events take the form of an “encounter” with an artistic work, and mediated contact is possible.

While some of these changes are involuntary and the organisers want to return to the previous methods of implementing activities as soon as possible, for some organisers the changes are seen as permanent and strategic. For example, the Kraków Film Festival gained many new participants thanks to its pandemic online formula and proved that the festival can indeed take place online. It was different for a theatre festival, the Divine Comedy in Kraków. It had a big online audience while streaming its plays on the Play Kraków platform and received good reviews. However, the specificity of theatre performance requires more contact with the audience, and it proved rather difficult to simultaneously produce a theatrical performance that was available on-site at the theatre and at the same time recorded in a manner good enough for professional online distribution.

Large and well-known outdoor festivals such as the Roskilde Festival (music and arts) and the Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts were cancelled both in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. Some festivals decided not to cancel but to have an “emergency” online edition in 2020 – such as the Unsound Festival in Kraków (focusing on

contemporary music — emerging, experimental, and leftfield) with a special publication containing texts and recordings issued. This edition was significantly titled "Intermission". The same festival organised a hybrid edition in 2021. Some organisers chose alternative projects to make up for the cancellations in 2021. The Glastonbury Festival, for example, decided in summer 2021 to open a pre-erected campsite, Worthy Pastures, on the festival site, with several activities for adults and children. While cancelling the 2021 edition of the festival, Open'er Festival (the biggest and most diverse festival in Poland) invented a new, smaller, and more dispersed project – Open'er Park, which lasted a couple of weeks at the Gdynia seaside offering art and cultural attractions.

When it comes to economic impact, the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions) industry as well as the cultural events sector have been hit hard by the pandemic. Results of the all-Poland survey showed that in 2020 there were 82% fewer events implemented, which resulted in a drop in annual revenues by 73% in this period and laying the staff off²³. The situation all over the world looks similar. Many organisers mitigated the problem by introducing online and hybrid events.

Similar decreases as in the MICE sector can be observed in the broader art and culture sector. The difference here is, however, that many of the actors in this sector are either public bodies or private ones that largely depend on public funds (subsidies and grants). In this area, it can be noticed that public patrons have largely withdrawn funds allocated for the organisation of events, redirecting them to activities related to supporting artists and entities active in the field of culture and art. As well as in the area of culture, the strategic activity is focused on creating online solutions and building new strategies for events. Some events have become smaller, involving a smaller number of creators and producers, more local artists, and a decreased number of recipients (also due to restrictions)²⁴.

To sum up, the consequences of the pandemic for the events sector (without going into the particular features

23 Rada Przemysłu Spotkań i Wydarzeń 2020.

24 Those ideas remain valid in the coming years due to the uncertainty about possible changes and operating models. In the future, the events sector may again follow many paths of development. Currently, big events are simply the riskier.

of individual events) and for cultural events in particular can be viewed from at least several perspectives: the event organiser, participating artists, participants/audience, and the city where an event is held and its residents:

- For an organiser, the described approaches mean financial losses related to cancellation or postponement of an event, especially as in many cases financial resources have been spent in preparing editions of events that finally have not happened (the scale of losses depends, among other factors, on the date and size of the event). Moreover, the following years (not even considering the issue of COVID-19) may also turn out to be problematic due to the reduced possibilities of obtaining support for event implementation from sponsors or public institutions (who may themselves be affected by the pandemic and economic crisis). This may translate into employment restrictions and even the collapse of some festivals (and thus the organising entities). Festivals, or rather the festivalisation of cultural life – the phenomenon of organising a large number of festivals and other cultural events, mainly for consumption and marketing purposes – leads to a number of entities involved in the event production chain, which may lose their *raison d'être* basically overnight.
- For artists, this is, first of all, the loss of the opportunity to present themselves and their art and, therefore, the possibility of earning money. Furthermore, it means losses related to the possibility of establishing contacts, cultural exchange, and interaction with other artists. After all, festivals are meeting places for the creative industry, artists, producers, and the public; a place where new talents can appear.
- For the audience, festivals are complex experiences for which participation in an online event is a very poor substitute. While maintaining contact with the audience throughout the year, e.g., online, can be an important element of audience development, the

essence of participation in the festival is collective energy and a community of experience – we often buy very expensive tickets just for that!

- For cities and their inhabitants, the impact of festivals is multifaceted and applies to both large cities and (sometimes even especially) smaller ones. Economic consequences are obvious (loss of revenues for local business and local government through taxes, fewer jobs, etc.). From a social perspective, events can act as an integration of the local community. They foster growth of pro-community attitudes if residents are involved in their organisation. Also, they can give residents the feeling of living in an important place where a lot is happening. (A wide cultural offer is one of the elements of the quality of life).

How were large public cultural institutions responsible for festivals affected by the pandemic? Selected Polish examples

The Wrocław Culture Zone, the Lublin Cultural Centre, and the Kraków Festival Office are municipal cultural institutions that manage a very large portfolio of events (some of them quite large) and own or supervise different types of infrastructure related to the organisation of cultural events. They also play the role of municipal coordinators and facilitators of activities related to strategic management, city marketing, and the development of the cultural sector in the city.

In March 2021 they suddenly had to face the challenge of event management during a pandemic. The first period was, on the one hand, based simply on postponing, rushing, and managing the chaos in connection with unimplemented contracts and calendars of future activities crumbling down. On the other hand, these institutions operate based on public funding, which gave them a kind of security and a good starting point for organising various types of joint venture projects with other actors in the field of culture. For this reason, their existence was not threatened, and after a temporary shock they could focus on new tasks related to the pandemic in the culture in their cities.

There were two approaches observed: 1) reactive (defensive adaptations to recent safety regulations) and 2) proactive (creative production to meet the current situation). Firstly, the challenge was to prepare for unexpected risks management (health and safety), new procedures for online work in cloud software, awareness of responsibility for participants and for the survival of the cultural sector in the city. All three institutions suddenly moved from the position of organisers to the position of support coordinators and strategists in the new reality. This situation can be described both as stagnation and acceleration in parallel. While the economy and events came to an abrupt halt (stagnation), there has been also a huge acceleration with conducting experiments, delivering analyses, support activities, and creating adequate solutions and infrastructure for the current difficult times.

The new reality, in a broader perspective, was associated by the organisation leaders with the introduction of “uncertainty”, because it was somehow an end of delivering larger and larger events. They realised that it did not necessarily yield only good results. It has occurred to decision-makers and managers that the excessive expansion of the event industry can be dangerous to the sustainable development of city culture.

Another phenomenon observed was an adaptation of the local event industry to new trends visible in such slogans as "be a tourist in your own city" and "tourism for social care and environment". Suddenly, the pandemic provided an opportunity to put these trends into practice and discuss how to organise better and more sustainable events in the future.

There has been a significant increase in implementing events online or in a hybrid mode. For these three institutions it became an important source of new trends and models of operation. Importantly, those institutions are prepared for this role; they have competences, infrastructure, and ideas for action, but the challenge is to build an audience in this new context and to compete in a completely global market for cultural events. Moreover, managers note that in the future events will be delivered in new venues: much more open-air, much greener, much more sustainable, just to fit the trend of being pandemic-resistant.

Based on the experiences of the three cities, the most likely trend is that events will stop growing and scaling up. They will change to face the new situation, where customers are nearby but are rather cautious and it is difficult to attract tourists due to restrictions and fears of the pandemic spread. This situation may last up to several years. This trend will probably not include young audiences so much, who seem to be less worried about the pandemic and probably return to cultural participation on-site quicker than other age groups.

In the opinion of leaders from the discussed organisations, more strategic management is required, as there are challenges to establish new models for action in relation to the sustainable development of cities and regions. However, no one intends to give up the long-term model of activities consisting in a strategy of attracting tourists and building a strong "meetings" sector, which is exemplified by the motto of Kraków Festival Office (2020):

We are a municipal cultural institution *, we work for creative industries development ©, and support business &, cultural tourism #, the meetings industry + and leisure industries ... [sic].

The European Capitals of Culture and the pandemic



The European Capital of Culture is a European Union initiative that, since 1985, has been aiming to highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, celebrate the cultural features Europeans share, increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area, and foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities. The title of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is awarded for a period of one year to two EU cities (and sometimes also a city from a third country) based on national competitions. These competitions are organised according to a calendar provided in the decision establishing the ECoCs. The title is awarded to those candidate cities who present the best visions for the cities – on the one hand in terms of cultural events for a given year (considering the European dimension and the involvement of local residents), and on the other hand in terms of long-term thinking about the role and dimension of culture in the city. Therefore, it is not just a year-long arts and culture festival, but rather a programme that employs culture for socio-economic impacts as well as cultural experiences and entertainment.

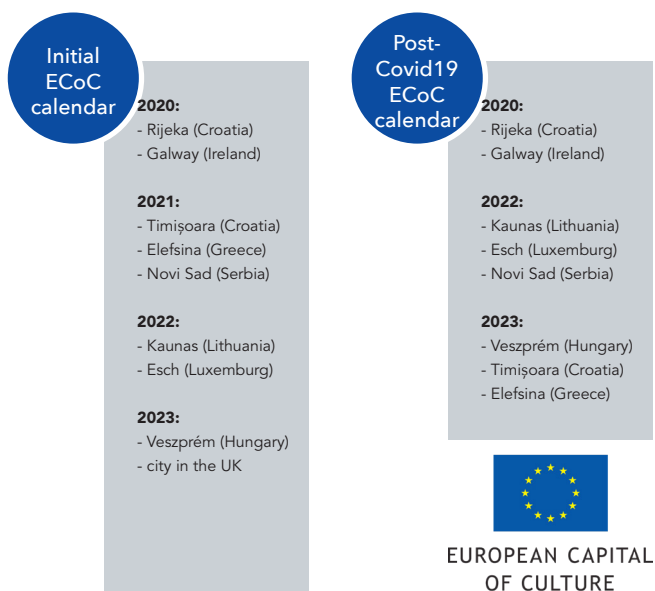


Fig. 2 Changes in the ECoC calendar due to the pandemic. Source: own creation based on the Official Journal of the European Union 2014, 2020.

The ECoC selection procedure gives the title winning city four years to fine-tune its vision and finalise and implement its cultural programme. Usually, this time is also used as sort of a prequel to the celebrations of the title year with a number of smaller events, activities designed to familiarise the local community with the ECoC ideas and engage them actively in the projects. This is exactly how much time both Rijeka and Galway spent on preparing for their ECoC year in 2020. They had barely started the celebrations when the pandemic hit, and most of their carefully prepared projects had to either be cancelled or postponed “without any clarity as to when or even if the situation will return to normality, while still incurring costs. In practice, they are prevented from fully implementing their cultural programmes in 2020 and capitalising on the huge human and financial investment made”²⁵.

They were not the only cities that were affected by the pandemic in their ECoC preparations. Timișoara, Elefsina, and Novi Sad, which were getting ready for their celebrations in 2021, experienced a high level of uncertainty in almost all

25 Official Journal of the European Union 2020.

the areas of preparation (especially regarding finances and safety regulations). The final year before the ECoC, which was supposed to be devoted to fine-tuning final details and building up momentum, saw a slowdown of preparations. Similar problems (though to a lesser degree) were observed in Kaunas and Esch (ECoC 2022). Veszprém 2023 seemed less affected, as there was still time to adjust their programme and action plans.

Taking into consideration lockdown measures, limited possibilities of cultural cooperation, decreasing revenues, and challenges in finding private sponsors, the European Parliament and Council decided to change the schedule for celebrating ECoC in 2020 and the following years (Official Journal of the European Union 2020) (see Fig. 2). As preparations for 2021 in 2020 were almost impossible, it was decided to postpone the ECoC celebrations in Novi Sad to 2022 and in Timișoara and Elefsina to 2023. The most afflicted ECoCs, Rijeka and Galway, received an extension to April 30, 2021.

Rijeka 2020 ECoC



Source: <https://rijeka2020.eu/en/program/programme-plus/>

Rijeka is a good example of a post-industrial harbour city that was looking for an opportunity for a new opening with the ECoC. The ECoC bid book focused strongly on social regeneration – citizen empowerment and community building. The ECoC team started producing events well before the titular year, so it looked optimistically to 2020 to finalise their programmes. They managed to have a grand opening on the 1st of February 2020 which was well received by the public. Rooted in the local history and art, it “provoked interest and gained respect”²⁶.

Obviously they did not have a chance to achieve many of their ambitions saved for 2020²⁷ before the pandemic hit. After a couple of weeks, they were forced to shut down the majority of their 250 programmes of 600 individual events, their budget severely reduced and a number of employees laid off. That attracted considerable criticism from Ivana Meštrović, the curator of exhibition programmes for the Rijeka 2020 programme at the time, strongly disapproving of the decisions taken in a hurry and with no prior debate. Insufficient communication and ideological differences between the central government and the city of Rijeka, in her opinion, also added to the problem²⁸. It was “a huge shock for everybody – those who were laid off, those who stayed, as well as for the cultural sector in general,” adds Lela

²⁶ Tkalčić 2020.

²⁷ However, much was done in the preparation year, before the titular year, including the infrastructural projects.

²⁸ Tkalčić 2020.

Vujanić, the chief programme manager of the Kitchen of Diversity programme in 2020. She fears it ruined public trust and the image of the project. With the pandemic evolving, people lost their interest in the ECoC²⁹. Certainly such a halt in cultural activity must have been felt by the residents.

Another issue was tourism. While the ECoC agency predicted about 4 million of visitors in the ECoC year³⁰, there were only 219,758 overnight stays (47% of the number in 2019)³¹. That must have had a negative impact on local businesses as well as cultural institutions.

“*The parameters of success are always related to the circumstances and to the efforts in which you give or do not give the maximum of yourself. In the case of the ECoC, after several years of intensive planning and preparation and ambitious goals, this year the project found itself in unimaginable circumstances in which the achievement of these goals was not possible. But a huge effort has been made to overcome these circumstances, and I believe that we have finally succeeded.*

Irena Kregar Šegota, head of Rijeka Agency 2020³²

With the extremely difficult circumstances of operating, including changes in the staff and the management, the final result of Rijeka 2020 efforts to conduct the ECoC included more than 400 cultural and art events held in Rijeka in 2020 (mostly during the summer) and a large number organised in April 2021³³. The Rijeka 2020 legacy includes new cultural infrastructure (renovated historical buildings, such as the Children's House, the City Museum, the City Library, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art – all located in the Art quarter Benčić – and the ship Galeb). Here the works fortunately had to start long before the pandemic, which in the end saved them as important elements of the ECoC's long term impact (infrastructure budget €44 million). It also includes permanent exhibitions on the city's history (in the City Museum), on Tito and the Galeb ship (on the ship), as well as permanent sculptures made by global, European, and Croatian artists placed in the public space (a new tourism route)³⁴.

29 Tkalić 2020.

30 Interreg Europe 2020.

31 Rijeka Tourist Board 2021.

32 Interreg Europe 2021.

33 Ri2020, 2021b.

34 Ri2020, 2021a.

The time of suspension due to the lockdowns was well-spent, to an extent, thanks to a flagship initiative called the Classroom education programme that consisted of capacity building activities meant to teach cultural event organisation skills. Another educational idea which is worth mentioning and which may have long-term impacts is the cooperation of the ECoC and the University of Rijeka in creating new programmes. DeltaLab at the Centre for Urban Transition, Architecture, and Urban Planning is an example here. The ECoC agency also feels that programmes for the participation and inclusion of citizens in the life and development of the city, such as those Initiated at RiHub (including Civil Initiatives, Green Wave, and the Citizens' Council), will be an important part of Rijeka life in the years to come³⁵.

Galway ECoC 2020



Source: <https://galway2020.ie/en/projects/the-streets-are-ours/>

The concept for Galway 2020 was Making Waves. It was about creating new ways of thinking, new ways of working, new conversations, and new partnerships aimed at ensuring a more creative Galway. Its vision included being a catalyst for a future of inclusivity, participation, and cultural sustainability. Preparation leading to the ECoC year cost over €11 million (2017-2019). However, 2020 did not start well

35 Ri2020, 2021a.

for the ECoC in Galway. The opening ceremony, estimated to have cost hundreds of thousands of euros³⁶, need to be cancelled due to severe weather conditions (Storm Ciara). Then the pandemic hit. “In light of the extraordinary challenges we are facing and the unknown timeline as a result of this ongoing public health emergency, the board of Galway 2020 today decided that a significant contraction of the programme is necessary,” announced the Galway 2020 board after an emergency meeting on March 24, 2020³⁷. As a result of the first pandemic restrictions of March 2020, both the programme and the budget of Galway 2020 were re-imagined and reduced. Consequently, there was a need to lay off some of the employees³⁸.

“*Minister for Culture Catherine Martin says this was a testament to the creativity and commitment of those involved.*

2020 celebrations had initially been budgeted at around €18 million. In the end, total 2020 expenditures amounted to €6,847,312³⁹. Although most of the 2020 activities were taking place online or at venues where social distancing could be respected (which meant smaller audiences), organisers were trying their best to prepare a good cultural offer under the circumstances. “We’re delivering what we said we would deliver when we won the bid in 2016, so we are working with all of our local cultural partners,” said Marilyn Gaughan-Reddan, head of the Galway 2020 programme in October 2020⁴⁰.

36 McGrath 2020.

37 Falvey 2020.

38 According to the Annual Report 2020 (which covered the period of January 2020 - April 2021), the average number of persons employed (including executive directors) was 20 in the title year (and 26 in 2019) (Galway 2020, 2021d, p.117).

39 Galway 2020, 2021c, p. 109.

40 Euronews 2020.

41 Galway 2020 2021a.

42 Galway 2020 2021d.

Finally, the ECoC programme in Galway included over 500 events across multiple genres (both on-site and online), over 600 artists were supported in the creation of new work, a large digital art archive was created, and over 31 local cultural partners were supported during the pandemic (sustaining jobs in the local cultural economy)⁴¹. It is worth underlining is that “[u]nlike any other Capital of Culture, the Galway programme is unique in that 100% of the programme is newly commissioned work, new and original work that is rooted in this very special place that is Galway,” in the words of Marilyn Gaughan-Reddan, Head of Programme⁴².

There is a question now of the Galway 2020 legacy. The ECoC title has not been used to refurbish existing infrastructure nor to build new buildings. Certainly there were good projects implemented and some positive legacies in terms of audience engagement (Bradley 2020). Galway 2020 is now in the stage of legacy planning process (September-December 2021) that includes research (evaluations and surveys) as well as meetings with stakeholders (Galway 2021b).

Kaunas ECoC 2022

The European Capital of Culture Kaunas 2022 is just getting ready to launch its programme next year, but a very large part of the preparations and the programme of preceding events have been taking place during the pandemic. That induced a number of problems, including financial (in the pandemic, public money is for other purposes). The Kaunas District Municipality had to cut circa 30% of the funding for 2020, while the Kaunas City Municipality – around 50%. Under the new circumstances considerable challenges in the areas of community building, audience development, and networking and communication appeared.



During the global lockdown (March – May 2020), while keeping restrictions on physical distance and isolation, the Kaunas ECoC members still proactively sought new forms of connecting people. There were proposed to citizens some offline experiences adaptable to quarantine restrictions such as Zumba on the Balconies and Culture to the Courtyards. The latter project included live performances of artists from different art fields in the courtyards of apartment buildings. These performances take place mostly in small towns in the District of Kaunas, where some of the apartment buildings are social housing and most spectators are seniors and families with small children. The aim of this new project is to help to live through the pandemic. There is a strong belief among the Kaunas ECoC organisers that art can give to the audience some strength, support, and unity. It can help us strengthen and sustain human relationships.

ECoC family

ECoC family is an informal gathering of past, present, and future European Capitals of Culture that meet on a relatively regular basis to share knowledge and experience and to discuss various challenges. In reaction to the pandemic there was a series of digital events called "ECoC Family Thursdays" set up. The intention was for it to work as a tool to share and learn how to overcome the main challenges, especially planning opening ceremonies and thinking about the legacy of the project. The main questions of those sessions were: Should culture and cultural policies be rethought? How should ECoCs advocate for the prioritisation of culture in local policies? Should the whole idea of the ECoC change? The ECoC programme is being affected by the changes of COVID-19 and social distancing recommendations. So the questions are how to begin to frame strategies under uncertain circumstances and what should be the response as European Capitals of Culture. Is online engagement the way forward, and what is happening with those who remain offline?

Opposite page: Blast
furnaces, Belval, Esch
sur Alzette (source:
-wuppertaler, 2016,
Wikimedia Commons).



la fête
d'histoire industrielle
Belval
2013-2016
www.fonds-belval.lu

Massenoire
Exposition
www.fonds-belval.lu

la fête
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What happens next?

At the moment of writing this text, the pandemic has not yet been tamed, and its end is difficult to predict. The cultural events sector is still facing uncertainties and insecurities. Although the experts are sure that we are in the midst of a profound transformation of the sector, reliable predictions and forecasts are rather problematic.

The cultural sector (interlinked with cultural tourism and cultural and creative industries) has been one of the fastest-growing global markets. The pandemic literally shut down the sector, in return pressuring its rapid reconstruction, mainly by accelerating pre-pandemic trends. It has also exposed its vulnerability, making people realise that its excessive growth endangers sustainable development. The experiences of the event organisers are common globally, as the same ruptures, rifts, and insecurities have been exposed during lockdowns and remissions of the pandemic. However, the answers to the crisis vary from one country to another.

Finances

What is most predictable is the financial problems of the sector in the nearest future. Due to cancellations of events, no revenues were gained, while still some costs were generated, leaving the organisers' budgets unbalanced. Moreover, ancillary income, such as that from rental of space, catering deals, and gift sales was lost⁴³. Experts' cautious statements imply that the pandemic drop in events' revenues is not to be regained until 2024⁴⁴.

The profitability of events will be additionally endangered by ongoing processes in complementary sectors. Firstly, the audience of cultural events was shaped largely by domestic and international tourism. This sector, however, was strongly hit by the pandemic, and travel levels are not likely to quickly return to pre-pandemic levels. Secondly, the economy may be suffering from the ongoing recession, with the raise of the unemployment rates, reduced purchasing power, and

43 This could be seen as one of the downsides of virtual events.

44 PWC 2020, p. 6.

consumer activity downsized. As a result, people may not be as eager as before to spend money on cultural events, economising by eliminating spending not considered vital in their shrinking budgets. We are also likely to observe a reduction in national, regional, and municipal subsidies towards culture⁴⁵. The state and local budgets will weigh in favour of new challenges such as counteracting climate change or strengthening health systems. The reduction in public expenditures on culture will hinder the creativity and engagement of cultural institutions or organisations, which constitute an important part of the activities of cultural event organisers. The same reasons are behind the probable crisis of private cultural funding, as donations, sponsorships, patronage, and philanthropic giving might be reduced and/or shifted elsewhere.

Regarding EU support for culture, the Creative Europe programme remains the flagship source for co-financing cultural and audio-visual sectors in Europe in the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. With its budget of 1.8 billion Euro, it supports, i.a., European cooperation projects (Culture strand) and audience growth on multiple platforms, which includes support for festivals (Media strand). It is here where some organisations could look for financial support for their international events. However, these resources are restricted to implementing specific projects, so budgets allocated for each call are limited (and so is the number of beneficiaries). Therefore, only few event organisers in Europe can benefit from this support. Of course, as in the previous Frameworks, specific thematic events could be part of projects supported by other Community programmes.

The NextGenerationEU, whose aim is to “help repair the immediate economic and social damage caused by the coronavirus pandemic and make the EU fit for the future”⁴⁶, could also be of interest to the event organisers; both its Recovery and Resilience Facility and the NextGenerationEU contribution to other EU programmes. With the former being managed by the member states, cultural operators can only benefit from grants or loans if their respective member

45 Travkina & Sacco 2020, p. 12.

46 European Commission 2021b.

states included culture in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). However, an overview prepared by CultureActionEurope shows that the majority of member states either do not foresee any specific line for culture, or the budget for culture stands at about 1%⁴⁷. There is one more European tool meant to help businesses in the cultural sector – the Cultural and Creative Sectors Guarantee Facility run by financial intermediaries in the member states. Understanding the challenge of accessing finances by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the cultural and creative sectors, the Guarantee Facility allows businesses to access loans more easily, guaranteeing up to €2 billion of new loans for cultural and creative SMEs⁴⁸.

The financial problems of event organisers will be coupled with the necessity to find resources for maintaining operational capacity in the new reality: investments in the events infrastructure in order to make it fit for reopening; investments in acquiring new skills in a quickly digitalising reality; digitalisation or adjustment to the hybrid work of the organisers' employees. For some event organisers, hybrid versions of the events as well as an imperative to organise the event online will mean an extra cost, both in financial and organisational terms. Digital competencies are not distributed equally among event organisers. While some festivals might come forward with a new offer, the others would be unfit to chase the competition. As a result of financial problems and the lack of substantial governmental help, future events might be scaled down and become less diverse; more modest; less original, exploring, provoking or audacious; rather tailored in a way that secures the return on investment of their organisation.

Consequently, the cultural events sector will be forced to look for other forms of financing and commercialising its digital offers. During the pandemic, different initiatives of reaching out to diversified social-based funding sources have been undertaken by event organisers. The crowdfunding for "Cloud Comic Con. A virtual comic festival" that brought together audiences from Glasgow Comic Con, Edinburgh Comic Art Festival, and Rai Con into one online space

47 Rosana & Tsitse 2021.

48 European Commission
2021a.

serves as an illustrative example here⁴⁹. Such funding schemes predominantly explore the close relations between organisers' surroundings and their dedicated audience. As such, crowdfunding on platforms such as Kickstarter or Patreon, online fundraising, online patronage, or subscription have already been put forward during the pandemic by some organisers as means of maintaining the operability of the sector. It is likely that independent and direct financing from the cultural offer's recipients will be an answer to some of the budgetary losses. Yet, it is improbable that this will offset the loss against public funds and become a stable and fully complementary source of income for the entirety of the sector, though it might prove adequate for some projects.

The other solution to develop a monetisation scheme might be to reuse one's archive as well as to create new engaging forms of participation for which audiences will be willing to pay. These forms might relate to unique experiences, closer contact with artists, or simply educational materials. There are emerging opportunities to build cross-sectoral activities and institutions or to build on strategic complementarities between culture and education, which may prove both creative and profitable.

Governance

When it comes to some of the governance issues, the pandemic released a great deal of solidarity and information sharing in the sector. A number of experts have pointed out that cultural event workers understand the power that lies in coming together and helping each other. The sector has organised not only online debates and webinars but also other initiatives that have helped to create platforms of best practices exchange and common problem solving. Examples of this include the movement #WEMAKEEVENTS, ResiliArt, and the creativesunite.eu platform. Solidarity within the cultural sector has become significant, as some organisers have refused to pay artists, the most vulnerable, for cancelled events⁵⁰.

49 Crowdfunder 2021.

50 Polivtseva 2020, p. 4.

Also, solidarity of the cultural sector with other sectors has been strengthened during the pandemic, several examples of which might be cited. Bratislava's administration started organising live outdoor concerts for the elderly population housed in care homes⁵¹. One World: Together at Home is a campaign rallying funds for the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund of the World Health Organisation. Within the campaign, a concert curated by Lady Gaga and supported by celebrities and artists was streamed on numerous platforms.

Artists

The other significant trend in financial terms is self-empowerment of artists via online platforms. That way some artists omit the intermediary (event organisers) between the artists and the audience by streaming online events live directly to the participants, building close relations with the fans, creating a community, and hoping for an independent income. The platforms give opportunities to collaborate with other artists, reward the most engaged fans with invite-only events, and monetise the gigs directly from the home of the artist to the home of the fan. This trend might be more and more important among artists, who have proven to be an essential yet vulnerable part of the events ecosystems. The cultural sector is characterised by combined forms of remuneration (self-employed; project contracts; part time salaried jobs). According to the Eurostat, across the EU-28, half of the cultural workforce is self-employed⁵². The shockwaves of the pandemic have exposed the fragility of the sector, composed not only of self-employed artists and creative workers but also micro-firms and non-profit organisations. While the pandemic had an immediate freezing effect on cultural activity, artists and other cultural employees were cut off from their income immediately. It has clarified the fragile situation of the cultural sector's employees and propelled the necessity to thoroughly reform the social security system for creators and artists⁵³. Without suitable public support or fundamental changes in pro-creative and pro-artists systems, and while the online platforms are not a sufficient answer, there is a growing risk of losing creative

51 KEA European Affairs
2020, p. 19.

52 Eurostat 2020.

53 Iwanowski & Szewczyk
2020.

individuals to other sectors, leaving cultural events stripped of their highly skilled and qualified workforce.

Digital vs real life events

It is difficult to predict whether people would prefer to consume events online or offline, and this is a decisive factor for the future of the sector. In the opinion of several event organisers, the craving to participate in real-life experiences will not go away, and participation in live performances will not simply be replaced with online experiences. While audiences still seek authentic, live events as they respond to the natural and primordial human need to be a part of the social and common experience – part of the crowd – organisers need to take into account the possibility of ticketing an event (somehow easier done for on-site events)⁵⁴.

Currently the cultural sector is experimenting with new forms of accessibility of real-life events. Since “attending a large music concert” is judged as highly risky for the transmission of the virus⁵⁵, some event organisers (depending also on COVID-19 regulations in each country) have decided to test all the members of the audience for COVID-19 before allowing them entry to the event⁵⁶. Spanish research has shown that transmission of the virus at such pre-tested events is rather slim. Organisers are seeking to open events to the public as soon as the restrictions are lifted and the vaccination process completed. It seems that the public is increasingly eager to participate, as it is reported that live events presumed to take place in situ in 2021 recorded quite high tickets sales⁵⁷. Data from a social survey in Poland shows, for example, that 75% of Poles miss cultural activities, and 23 % of them would take part in a cultural event just after the opening and 30% a month after⁵⁸. To find a middle ground between sanitary restrictions and the eagerness to participate in live events, organisers increase the number of outdoor events, such as those held in parks or unusual (for a cultural activity) public spaces.

54 In the beginning of lockdowns, several cultural operators prepared their cultural offers (concerts, plays, films, and workshops, but also large festivals and events) to be accessed free of charge online. As the time of the pandemic lengthened, the sustainability of offering free events began to be doubted, both in an economic sense and concerning the level of appreciation by increasingly distracted viewers.

55 Texas Medical Association 2021.

56 BBC 2021.

57 Ingham 2021; The Guardian 2021.

58 Narodowe Centrum Kultury 2021.

The pandemic acted as a powerful spur first to expand the online presence of culture and second to change audience behaviour in this field. The pandemic has propelled cultural behaviour towards proactive, agile, “on-demand” consumption of culture provided online. Event organisers have themselves become broadcasting companies, not only producing an event but also primarily circulating it and finding its audience via different online channels. Festivals and events have made an enormous effort to create new offers and have reached new audiences. This potential is not to be lost in the time to come. Festivals have used YouTube, online streaming, webinars, online courses, conference talks, and video broadcasting to reach their public. Although these forms were met with audience interest, more fulfilling and engaging ways to participate in the events online will continue to develop. The cultural events sector is forced to experiment with new forms of cultural expression. For example, the London Wireless Festival comprised live performances filmed in MelodyVR's studio space in Los Angeles as well as in the historic theatre of London's Alexandra Palace⁵⁹. More than 130,000 people from 34 countries attended the event virtually⁶⁰. This same technology had been experimented with in theatre spectacles⁶¹. Another creative solution would be to connect the gaming experience with the event, which happened during Fortnite's Marshmello concert attended by 10.7 million people and then rewatched on YouTube 27 million times⁶².

Online versions of events broaden the audience and reach people who for some reason would be excluded from participation otherwise, e.g., people who cannot travel, such as stay-at-home parents or the disabled. While digital offers make events more accessible to some, it is important to highlight the possibility of excluding others – those without access to the Internet and ICTs. Another silver lining to online events, highlighted by organisers, is the possibility to invite guests and artists who would be normally unavailable due to, for example, time limitations⁶³.

59 Richards 2021.

60 PWC 2020, p. 11.

61 Culture.pl 2018.

62 Webster 2019.

63 OECD SMEs, Regions and Cities 2021a.

Therefore, it seems that the digitalisation and online presence of events will be one of the stimuli for the events' futures, opening the sector to new possibilities. The multiplication of cultural offers produces a world of ever-expanding choice. Some of the VR events might create social, collective, immersive experiences and create live-like feelings. It will, however, have the effect of tightening competition among the events. If localisation is not a problem and we do not have to travel to participate in the prestigious, recognised events of international profile, we might be more likely to choose them over nearby ones which are important to local vitality and cultural diversity.

Cities are at risk here, as hybrid events, promoting online solutions, might lure cultural events towards intangible experiences, separating people from actual places and surroundings. As cities profited largely from cultural events, some of these benefits might be lost to the online presence of the events. The downsizing of cultural offers might have effects surpassing a simple economic outlook. Social bonds, creativity, the well-being of people, and diversity would be a victim here.

Well-being and social role

If festivals and events had been considered an economic driving force before, the pandemic has propelled a debate on the role of culture even faster towards its social values. It has become evident how important it is to socialise within a cultural events frame; how important for the well-being and mental health of society cultural events are. The link between culture and health will certainly be explored further. The events are about togetherness, joy, and trust – which are values important in the process of restoring life after the pandemic. It is then important that a cultural milieu is able to generate a discourse in which culture will be one of the driving forces of economic and social renewal and regeneration processes⁶⁴. Such initiatives and advocacy actions have already been undertaken by a number of networks. In October 2020 more than 110 pan-European networks (including these dealing

64 Travkina & Sacco 2020, p. 1.

with events, festivals, and live performances) called on to their national governments and the European Commission to “Make culture central in the EU recovery”. Advocating for at least 2% of the EU Recovery Fund for culture and including culture as a priority sector when using funds from the NextGenerationEU, the networks repeated their arguments in a second call published in March 2021⁶⁵. This task is vital due to revenue loss, drainage of cultural and creative sectors due to poor conditions, the downsizing of public financial aid, and general marginalisation of cultural events in the post-pandemic reality. Counteracting these tendencies would support an in-depth, social transformation of local economies based on the values that culture provides.

Being local

This question of locality has become extremely important in the discussion on post-pandemic trends. As the pandemic closed people at home, immobilising them in their closest neighbourhoods, what was understood was the importance of local structures, local resilience, and connections within local communities that helped members to endure the crisis. It also became evident that our world had become smaller and limited to the nearest surroundings, giving an impetus to appreciate local neighbourhoods. Events were increasingly tailored to be consumed where the audience is – at home. While this trend of the “home delivery of culture” was visible in previous years, programmes proposing “embargoed culture” were met with a success. Projects such as “Windowflick” – in which people were watching screenings in Berlin’s courtyards, unifying the neighbourhood⁶⁶ – serve as examples. It is likely that the segment of “pop up events” will develop, bringing culture closer to the public and increasingly addressing the problem of localness. As a result, we might observe a blossoming of local culture much more on issues reflecting the identity and uniqueness of the place, exploring local resources and heritage. This trend will be strengthened by the turn towards residents as main consumers of the culture as opposed to tourists, whose presence proved to be volatile and uncertain.

65 CultureActionEurope
2021.

66 Salfiti 2020.

There is also one more phenomenon observed during the pandemic likely to stay in the “new normal” which can affect the organisation and location of events within cities and regions. The pandemic’s consequences have limited the functions of city centres (fewer tourists, more people working or studying from home, empty office spaces, etc.), while strengthening suburban areas and contributing to their development (e.g., new businesses to cater for the needs of stay-at-home employees; more amenities for people in their neighbourhoods)⁶⁷. This may also contribute to the decentralisation of events in the future, i.e., events are more likely to be dispersed throughout the city, closer to where people actually live, rather than concentrated in one location, preferably the most iconic. Not only would it be reasonable for sanitary and social distancing reasons, but also it would relieve pressure from these heavily used spots and distribute cultural life more evenly throughout the city. Events of mass character might become less attractive to organise, or at least their scale may be downsized. We might be seeing more events scattered around the city or even the region under one umbrella brand.

Green and sustainable events

Recent years have brought even more strongly yet another topic – climate change. The pandemic became an opportunity to see for oneself how much humans impact the planet – not just vis-à-vis the spread of disease, but also the positive environmental effects of reducing economic activity and travel (especially by air)⁶⁸.

Generally, events can have a negative impact on the environment, especially big ones. For example, they can contribute to raising CO₂ levels due to travel of guests and participants. According to Collins and Potoglou⁶⁹, travel constitutes 80% of CO₂ emissions attributable to UK festivals! Events can also generate solid plastic waste, at the moment not only disposable food containers but also all that comes with sanitary restrictions: masks; gloves; face shields. Also, if sanitary protocols remain, that will mean more

67 Boni 2020, p. 15-16.

68 E.g., Nigam et. al 2021, Noack et al. 2021, Khan et al. 2021.

69 2019.

pollution from cleaning chemicals and more water use. The pandemic restrictions could be used as a moment to rethink the way events are organised and to define new eco-friendly strategies that include such issues as green sources of energy, clean energy destinations and good sustainability venues, usage of electric transport, taking advantage of the virtual, introducing plant-based catering and biodegradable containers, etc. etc.⁷⁰

However, the discussion of events in the ecological context should go further, following Mair and Smith's⁷¹ claim that "we should no longer merely be trying to run 'sustainable events'; rather, we should focus on how events can contribute to the sustainable economic, social, and environmental development of the places which host them." Festivals in the post-pandemic formula should help to achieve sustainable development goals rather than exploit local resources. To do so, they might play a role in bringing together people from different backgrounds or focus more on the development of sustainable tourism. Moreover, events could even strongly advocate for more sustainable, pro-civic behaviours and create a momentum for people to reflect on the ways they want to consume, live, learn, and evolve. After all, events are part of the experience economy and experiential marketing. The World EXPOs seem to be good examples of undertaking this challenge, such as the EXPO 2020 Dubai UAE⁷² and its Programme for People and Plant meant to inspire "collective and meaningful action to address the world's most critical challenges and opportunities".

70 Eventsforce 2020.

71 2021.

72 2021.



Conclusions

Starting in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic brought a sudden halt to event activities all over the world. Lockdowns and sanitary restrictions changed the landscape of events – they have been postponed; cancelled; re-sized; shifted online. Not knowing when and how the situation will end, we need to discuss their future. Some may raise doubts as to whether big and mega-events have any future – in the new normal there may not be a place for them as we know it. However, it is worth remembering that events have often been created after great shocks, crises, and traumas as an element and a clear sign of the renewal of the public mood, overcoming crises and renewing cultural connections. After all, the Salzburg Festival was established after WWI and the International Edinburgh Festival after WWII, both as important symbols of integrating the world of values in the epochs after the catastrophes of both wars. Today we need events as well, as much as we need culture. Culture (books; music; online entertainment) has helped us most through the hardships of the pandemic. There is no doubt that, in the following years, events will still exist, because people have the same needs of being and experiencing together as before the pandemic.

“There is also a social aspect of that coming together, the moment (to feel as a part of) the community, with your neighbours; friends; family, but also chatting with people you don't know who sit next to you. (Being part of the cultural event) already gives you the connection with the Other. There is this huge hunger of people to be again in a big crowd, together, taking part in something that overwhelms you. It will be a process of coming back to (the mega-event), but it is about understanding human nature. It is so much in our nature to be together; to feel a part of the event; we are social animals; we need it... can't stop that nature... it creates happiness, chemistry inside people.

One of the interviewees of the HOMEE project

The question remains what the world may look like after the pandemic. In order to describe the “new normal”, partly still a pandemic one and partly already post-pandemic, we can refer to two models of reaction: one focused on regeneration, the other on transformation of the events environment. Both models rely on taking progressive action in the current situation. The regeneration is a trend of recreating the ecosystem of events after the crisis of one and a half years of social distancing that caused a disintegration of social ties as well as production chains. The transformation, in turn, is a laboratory trend that defines new, changed conditions, where new solutions in the area of events are searched for and tested.

Evolution will be needed regarding event organisation and logistics as well as their content. Given the economic situation they may shrink, at least budget-wise. Given the shift to the virtual world forced by lockdowns, they can retain their hybrid approach with livestreaming or uploading recorded content for a wider audience to use. They may be more environment-conscious and contribute more to local sustainable development.

In countries that are preparing for the European Capital of Culture title competitions there is a debate starting on what the post-pandemic ECoC should look like. The legal framework for celebrations is defined by the Decision No 445/2014/EU (Official Journal of the European Union 2014), and it is not likely to be changed at the moment. However, the size, content, and management of the ECoC⁷³ is up to the event organisers. It can be argued that they will follow the trends described above, gradually changing the ECoC initiative itself.

73 As long as they fulfill the criteria defined in the Decision – that is: contribution to the long-term strategy; a European dimension; cultural and artistic content; capacity to deliver; outreach and management.

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HOMEE

Heritage Opportunities/threats within Mega-Events in Europe:

Changing environments, new challenges and possible solutions for preservation in mega-events embedded in heritage-rich European cities

The Project

The research project “HOMEE – Heritage Opportunities/threats with Mega-Events in Europe” is funded under the European call “JPICH Heritage in Changing Environments”. The HOMEE project brings together leading research centres working in the fields of cultural heritage preservation and mega-event planning, in close contact with key institutions and policy officers who have already had or will have direct responsibility for planning and implementing mega-events in Europe, from the local to the international level. The project investigates past events and develops new policy tools for dealing with the emerging opportunities and threats in planning and implementing mega-events in heritage-rich cities.

For further information, visit:

<https://mck.krakow.pl/homee-about-the-project>

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