

## CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19) AS A STRESS TEST OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF BULGARIA BASED ON THE EFFECT ON MUSEUM VISITS

**Abstract:** The article seeks to examine how the heritage management system of Bulgaria is to overcome the decrease of the number of visitors and continue their socialization activities during the governmentally imposed lockdown due to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. A brief analysis on the state of the number of visits as well as on their part in the overall budget of museums is made. The conclusion proposed is that the high government subsidies compared to the income from visit fees is going to preserve the proper financial functioning of the museums. Additionally, the digital efforts in Bulgarian museums continue through the lockdown, which prove their resilience in regard to socialization.

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The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic led the governments all around the world to adopt measures such as prohibition of public events and temporary closure of various institutions including museums and monuments. Based on the presumption that for many of those cultural heritage institutions one of the most important source of income is the fees visitors pay, the estimation of the real and possible future effects of such closures would be crucial. Further, the number of visitors presents the *raison d'être* or the socialization effort of museums in most of their activities, surpassing those of their academic research dissemination or digitalization efforts. That estimation is also crucial to test how national heritage management systems deal with stress and thus show their resilience, effectiveness and sustainability.

In Bulgaria, the restrictions on museum visitations such as postponement of events and health checks upon entry started on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (Ministry of Health, 2020) and total closure commenced as of 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (Ministry of Health, 2020). Given that such measures are most likely to continue until the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, the following estimation would take two months lack of income from visits translated in the normal yearly visits for the period 13<sup>th</sup> of March-13<sup>th</sup> of May, given that most of the utilities and other expenses would remain unchanged.

Given that data on museum visits at each location, especially recent one, is virtually impossible to obtain, the statistics of the National Institute of Statistics could be used. Based on that data, it could be established that the number of visitors in the Bulgarian museums is steadily rising from 63 916 visits per 100 000 inhabitants in 2013 to 72 375 in 2018. For the same period the expenses per capita on museums almost doubled from 5.5 to 9 BGN per year. The income from entry fees remained stable

around 20% of the total museums income for 2013-2018 (National Statistical Institute, 2020). The income from EU funding for the same period remained insubstantial dropping from circa 4% to circa 2% of the total income (National Statistical Institute, 2020). Extrapolating on the numbers presented, it could be argued that in financial terms, the decrease of income per the totality of museums would be, as per the taken two months of lockdown, 2 months out of 12 months per year, times the roughly 20% of the visit fee from the total income equaling to 3,(3)% decrease of total income per 2020.

Additionally, Google has used the voluntary sharing of the location from its customers and has revealed that from the 29<sup>th</sup> of February to the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 the overall visits of Retail and Recreation locations has dropped with 55% (Google, 2020). The data includes various locations that got included in the closure measures after the museums in Bulgaria and further the whole period of 29<sup>th</sup> of February - 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 in which the measures were not applied at all. However, it is highly probable that museums were one of the first Retail and Recreation sites to be abandoned on purely personal concerns of self-isolations, as malls, for example, often include grocery markets and, as a whole, the data provided to Google is based on the preference of the business owners. Based on the report, it could be speculated that museums in Bulgaria were and are likely to be less visited outside of the scope of the governmentally imposed closure.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has proposed several ways to combat the lack of visitors by engaging them online through live-streaming, posting on social platforms, creating quizzes and competitions (ICOM, 2020). 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 audience (Towse, 2010). Thus, such digital efforts may prove crucial during the lockdown. However, in Bulgaria, the digitalization of cultural heritage and museum exhibition is not based on common policy (Vasileva & Petrova, 2019), it is still in its infancy and the mitigating effect as well as its estimation would be hard to establish. The number of museums with at least one publication on electronic version has dropped from 73 in 2014 to 54 in 2018 and the number of museums having electronic inventory has dropped from 141 to 132, which roughly corresponds to the decrease of the number of museums from 198 to 174 (National Statistical Institute, 2020). That number suggests that some digitalization of museums and their exhibition is existing for most of the museums, but their ability to empower digitalization on a broad scale is still questionable.

For immediate testing of the application of the ICOM proposals for museums adapting to the coronavirus lockdown in Bulgaria, a sample of the three biggest museums of common cultural heritage could be taken. At first, the National Museum of Ethnography has postponed lectures and a conference, but has not provided any digital form of engagement (Institute for Ethnology and Folklore with Ethnographic Museum, 2020). The National Museum of History has uploaded some digital resources and videos on its social media channel with an increased pace (National History Museum, 2020). The National Institute for Archaeology with Museum has even uploaded most of its video content on its brand new social media channels and has continued to update the public on its ongoing activity through the social isolation period (National Institute for Archaeology with Museum, 2020). Based on a free sample to check the activity at smaller locations outside the capital, the Regional Museum of History - Dobrich (Regional Museum of History - Dobrich, 2020) is updating on various information on its website and the Regional Museum of History – Ruse, even though its website is not updated regularly, is very active on its social media channels with almost daily posts (Regional Museum of History – Ruse, 2020).

In conclusion, it could be argued that the current governmentally imposed lockdown on Bulgarian cultural heritage museums would not pose a serious risk to their return to normal

functioning. The over-reliance on state subsidies is a factor which would sustain them in financial terms. Further, based on the examples provided, socialization and dissemination activities continue and even speed up due to the digitalization effort of the personnel during the pandemic.

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