



NORTH MACEDONIA AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

OVERVIEW

February to April 2020

The situation in the cultural sector in North Macedonia is more or less the same as the rest of Europe, at least with the complete lockdown. On February 28th 2020, following the Government's recommendation, all major public cultural events were canceled until March 6th. However, with the increase of the local transmission of COVID-19, this measure was prolonged until March 13th (including sporting events etc.) and on March 10th all schools (primary and secondary) and universities were also closed. On March 13th the measures were taken one step further and all cultural institutions (cinemas, museums etc.) were completely closed to visitors. Finally, an emergency situation was declared in the whole country. This resulted not only in a shutdown of the institutions, but also reduced staff in them.

Following the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government is introducing necessary measures on a daily basis, especially security and economic measures, but culture was somehow never mentioned in this context. Even stranger, if you take a look at the website of the Ministry of Culture (kultura.gov.mk), the situation for culture is completely "normal"; there is no COVID-19 pandemic, everything is like it was and there is no need for any special measures! Although there were lonely voices – mine also, several times – in favour of some "first aid" or necessary course of action by the Government in the cultural sector, nothing is happening so far, not even an effort to make approximate assessments of possible damages.

However, the so called independent cultural sector (or at least part of it), together with the Syndicate of Cultural Workers, have filed an Initiative with the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Culture and the Mayor of Skopje for special measures to help the independent cultural sector in the time of COVID-19 crisis. The Initiative suggests 3 basic measures: 1. A special six month fund of monthly





subventions for the independent sector; 2. Urgent overdue payment of the grants for 2019 and 3. Urgent payment of at least 70% of the grants for 2020 etc. Following the Initiative, a meeting with the Minister of Culture was held on March 24th 2021. The Minister agreed to urgently pay the debt for 2019 and to fasten all the arrangements for 2020 grants, but as for measure no. 1, the Law on Culture does not allow monthly payments to the independent cultural sector. He suggested this issue could be discussed with the Government. However, I think that the Minister in times like this (having in mind especially the proclaimed emergency situation) has the power to suggest such a measure and even to propose necessary changes to the Law on Culture.

The “dilemma” whether the Law on Culture allowed monthly financial support to the independent cultural sector was successfully solved by the Government’s decision (from the beginning of April) to include self-employed artists (140) in the monthly financial support plan with a minimal salary (14.500 MKD) for April and May. (This measure follows the Government’s decision for a general deduction from the salaries of all state/local appointed or elected officials to a minimal salary for at least two months). The Government is also considering other measures to help the independent cultural sector, artists and cultural workers under temporary contracts, film workers etc.

The City of Skopje has also introduced certain measures to help culture in these “corona times”, i.e.: postponing non-priority capital projects; advance payments for independent sector projects; community open space concerts that can be watched from terraces during the curfew hours; logistic and psychological support from volunteers for older (70+) artists and cultural workers; defining a post-crisis cultural strategy etc.

May 2020 – October 2021

The situation with COVID-19 in North Macedonia since the last update (April 2020) hasn’t changed much compared with the rest of European countries. Pandemic waves (second, third etc.) are coming and going away. Government’s recommendations are more or less evolving according to the percentage of vaccinated people (which is very





low, less than 30%) and the number of newly infected cases, the daily number of deceased which is still high etc. However, the National plan for COVID-19 vaccination was delivered very late (on February 5th,, 2021), the vaccines were also purchased very late (February/March 2021), the process of immunization wasn't introduced until April etc. Throughout 2020 – except for short intervals – cultural institutions were closed to the public, with none or radically reduced programmes, especially the international projects.

A major development in the work of the cultural institutions was the introduction of Protocol No. 47 for libraries, museums, galleries and exhibition spaces. It imposed mandatory rules for the institutions as organizers of events and the public: use of protection face masks, keeping a physical distance, intensive disinfection of premises, reduction in the number of visitors (15 visitors per 100 sq.m. at a time; this measure was changed in October 2021 allowing up to 50% of the available space for audiences), special controls in front of the box office and the entrance of the institution etc. Special measures were also set for the film industry.

Starting from September 2021, as in most other public spaces (restaurants, cafeterias, city malls...), valid vaccination certificates was introduced for visiting programmes in the cultural institutions.

North Macedonian Culture in Corona Time

DESCRIPTION

Coronavirus has dramatically changed cultural life in Republic of North Macedonia. Everything that we recognized as normal in public life, in social interaction and communication, is now being tested, like never before. There have taken very serious and drastic measures. Some of them, such as the introduction of a state of emergency and restrictions on movement, were the result of difficult but inevitable decisions.





Many of Macedonian citizens do not go to work, our children do not go to kindergartens, school, colleges. With the first measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, all museums, galleries and number of small and medium-sized enterprises like creative ateliers had to be shut down.

With protective measures against KOVID 19 spheres in culture begin to work on 03/07/2020.

The Decision of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia also adopts protocols adopted by the Commission for Infectious Diseases at the Ministry of Health, for the operation of libraries, museums, galleries and exhibition spaces, dance and ballet clubs, and activities and work can be started by organizing events and manifestations in the open space, with mandatory compliance with the Protocol on the manner and conditions for organizing events by the Commission for Infectious Diseases at the Ministry of Health and the Association of Event Industry.

During the Covid - 19 crises the North Macedonian government has adopted six packages of economic measures to deal with the crisis. Simulations in cultural and creativity sphere began and taken a place in Second package, with the following measures:

- Measure - help for artists - A minimum wage for the months of April and May 2021 was be provided for 141 independent artists, as well as contributions through the Ministry of Culture.
- Measure - Monthly wage (monetary compensation) for citizens who lost their jobs due to the crisis, in the amount of 50% of the average wage of the employee – There was planned for the citizens who lost their jobs due to the crisis, to be paid monetary compensation every month in the amount of 50% of the average monthly net salary of the employee for the last 24 months in accordance with the Law on Employment and Insurance in Case of Unemployment and Article 68 of this Law, according to which the citizens who lost their jobs will receive compensation through the Employment Agency according to their years of service.





For example: For 5 years of service, 4 months of compensation, or for 24 years of service - 12 months of compensation.

In the third package of covid measures, compensation were provided and provided for different types of economic entities, but not for those working in the field of culture and art, unfortunately. The third package of economic measures actually aimed to enable the revival of the Macedonian economy through direct support of the citizens and the economy, ie. to increase consumption and stimulate the protection, promotion and growth of the domestic economic supply.

The fourth package aims to ensure the sustainability of domestic economic activities and jobs, to recover certain activities, to ensure the stability of social transfers and to provide policies that will help implement a rapid exit strategy when the crisis is over.

In fourth package there was intended a place and one measure for the cultural and creative association. This is the measure - Support for artisans - reduction of the VAT rate on their services and products from 18% to 5% in order to strengthen their competitiveness in the market. Other measures, such as those for support for payment of wages or access to favorable loans from the Development Bank of Northern Macedonia, remain available to the self-employed artisans.

Additional measure that was included in Fourth package was:

- Measure - Grants for the Association of Dance Associations. 40 associations from the Association of Dance Associations was grant with 2,000 euros for each association.**
- Measure - Financial support for design studios - Financial assistance for 12 design studios for organizing weddings that are prohibited in this period with a one-time amount of 90,000 MKD;**
- Measure - Financial assistance for independent artists, filmmakers, artists and cultural workers - Gradual payment of financial assistance to: independent artists, filmmakers, artists and cultural workers, from 14,500, 18,000 or 21,500 MKD**





depending on the income for a period of 3 months, for a total of 462 beneficiaries for which a total of 24,948,000 MKD are provided for which payment will be announced a call from the Ministry of Culture;

- Measure - Financial support for all musicians and tour guides - Financial support of 30,750 MKD will be given to all musicians, members of musicians' associations as well as licensed tour guides, who during 2020 had an average monthly net income below 15,000 MKD.

Financial support for registered craftsmen for 2021 was provided in Fifth package. Artisans will be allowed the solutions for advance payment of personal income tax to be reduced by 50% in 2021 compared to the solutions from 2020.

In this package was planned support for the industry and the operators for organization of events for realization of projects of exceptional public interest in the amount of 61 million MKD. This measure is intended for legal entities that organize public events, ie marketing and event agencies, productions and other operators in the event organization industry, which, among other things, will hire performers, educators, cultural workers, artists, musicians and other professions in the industry that are directly affected by the pandemic. The program was implemented by the General Secretariat of the Government and the applicants, ie the operators who organize public events will have to adhere to the following criteria: first, events on a given topic of exceptional public and state interest, second providing visibility of the event to the general public through partnerships with national and other televisions as well as through other types of media and third, involvement of performers, educators, cultural operators, artists, musicians and others in the production of content within events of public interest.

Financial support of 30,750 MKD was given to all musicians, members of musicians' associations as well as licensed tour guides, who during 2020 had an average monthly net income below 15,000 MKD, in Sixth package of measures to combat the Covid crisis.





The ban on social activities affected mainly to micro and small companies in the catering sector and culture, and the travel ban affected sectors tourism and transport and seasonal workers. The situation further deteriorated during the second quarter from the year when the strongest impact on was felt economy, and the impact on health was most pronounced in last quarter on 2020.

The overall, general side effect of this pandemic on the cultural institutions in North Macedonia is the radical reduction of their programmes and the drastic decrease in public attendance. Macedonian cultural institutions have always had a “problem” with a small but more or less constant number of visitors, but the pandemic has pushed it to the very limit.

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