The Social and Economic Impact of COVID 19 Pandemic on Museums. Case Study: „Princely Court” National Museum Ensemble

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Abstract: The new coronavirus (Covid-19) is one of the main challenges world today has to address. With no large scale availability vaccine yet, and more or less experimental medical treatments for curing the disease, we can safely say that we are still far behind a solution to this problem. This new pandemic is considered the biggest threat to the global economy since the Second World War and there is no aspects of human life have not been affected it, spiritual ones included. Its high contagiousness, as well as novelty, raised all kind of challenges and one of the main ones was our manner to produce answers, in early stages at least, this creating problem on its own and of its design. As well as all the other institutions, theatres, cinemas, concert halls, spaces of socialization and in the same time places of wonder, knowledge and spiritual enrichment the museums were heavily affected by the pandemic crisis, especially those who's collections are not, but in very small proportion available, to the public through virtual media. Such a case is „Princely Court,, National Museums Ensemble from Targoviste, Dambovita County, Romania. The present paper proposes an overview of the highlights in institution's activity the past years in comparison with how the pandemic crisis affected its activity in the past months and what were the responses given to keep the museum in the eye of the public. It will also try to summarize how and to what extent the activity went back to „normal” after the emergency state earlier imposed was lifted and how the visitors responded to the new realities.

Keywords: *Pandemic, COVID-19, Museum Visiting, Cultural Policy, Princely Court of Targoviste.*

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1. Introduction

Rightfully many will wonder but who is or what is “Princely Court” National Museums Ensemble (from now on “Princely Court” N.M.E.)? Therefore we consider necessary making a short presentation of our case study.

It is a cultural institution under the authority of Dambovița’s County Council that reunites 15 museums and memorial spaces: in Targoviste: Princely Court Ensemble, Old Books and Prints Museum, Dambovita County History Museum, Dambovița County Art Museum, Dambovita County Writers Museum, Human and Technological Evolution during Palaeolithic Museum, Romance Museum, Art Museum “Vasile Blendea”, Art Museum “Gheorghe Petrascu”, the exhibition “The metamorphoses of a place of memory: from the chivalry of the “Ferdinand I” Cavalry Officers Academy off to the profane space of the trial and execution of the Ceausescu’s and of the end of the totalitarian regime in Romania”, and Ethnographic Museum in Pucioasa, Constantin Brancoveanu’s Palace Ensemble in Potlogi. Art Museum Gabriel Popescu in Vulcana Pandeale, Caragiale Memorial House in Caragiale, Ethnographic Museum Prof. Dumitru Ulieru in Pietrosita, and it is also the administrator of a natural touristic attraction: Ialomita’s Cave in the southern Carpathians, Bucegi Mountains.

Since the second half of the 19th century, we observe a growing concern for the national heritage’s fate. We own a great deal to people like Dimitrie Papazoglu who in 1863 draws a first historical heritage inventory of the counties: Dambovita, Prahova, Muscel and Olt along with a map, the first cartographic document of its nature for a designated area and who in 1874, in a meeting with Dambovita’s County Prefect urges him to speed up taking action to preserve and protect objects and places that belonged to the historical heritage of the localities under his administration [2].

The issue of a museum in Targoviste was discussed again on the occasion of resuming the works on the new building of New Metropolitan Church. From Wallachia’s ecclesiastical representative monumental ensemble, which had been demolished in 1892, remained architectural pieces of great artistic value. In 1928, the Commission of Historical Monuments together with the Targoviste’s City Hall financed the organization of the Lapidary Museum of the Metropolitan Church, which functioned until 1943 and which, in addition to specific pieces, also housed pieces of folk art from the George Olszewski collection [5].

A new step forward is the small Ethnographic Museum organized in 1932 at the School Inspectorate and later at the Orphanage before further proceedings are made that will eventually lead to the opening of a regional museum. On 3rd October 1937, a Royal Decree acknowledges the decision of the local authorities with the help of the Historical Monuments Commission from Bucharest to build a dedicated construction for a later museum institution. To make this initiative possible a great contribution had senator Constantin Dimitriu, mayors Gogu Parvulescu and Lazar Petrescu, professor and archaeologist Virgil Draghiceanu to name but a few. The architect Nicolae Ghika-Budesti will design the building later known as the “Stelea Galleries” and today “Human and Technological Evolution during Palaeolithic Museum”. The works began in 1937-1939 but the start of the Second World War and the catastrophic earthquake of 1940 will slow down progress and only with the help of the central government in 1942-1943 it was possible that finally on 30 January 1944 the “Local Regional Museum” was inaugurated that functioned on its original structure until 1968 with nine sections and four main domains: archaeology, history, art and folk art and ethnography [6].

Since it is not the aim of our paper we will not go further with the timeframe of the history of the Targoviste’s museum institutions.

2. Problem Statement

The way the new coronavirus has affected our lives is a new constant theme in the area of concern of many researchers of various fields either as individuals or as professional associations.

Except for the reports the major international organizations as U.N. [12] and U.N.E.S.C.O. [9] or professional institutions as I.C.O.M. [7] or N.E.M.O. [8] in the past months there is growing affluence of articles and even books on the subject even thou sometimes the museum is incorporated in a broader view that discusses how the plague had affected local and international movement, hence communication and tourism. Indirectly the museums as an industry that meets on many borders: science, culture and entertainment are part of these analyses. Just an example is the volume “Tourism Facing a Pandemic. From Crisis to Recovery” coordinated by Frederica Burini from Bergamo University [3].

At a simple inquiry on academic share sites such as academia.edu or reseachegate.net, we can observe that at the time this paper is being written there are already over 1.400 results on the linked topic: museum COVID-19.

Our paper will bring only but a small contribution but hopefully a useful one and it is to be regarded as a source of information and to some extent a study.

From the UNESCO Report, we learn that 90% of all museums in the world closed their activity with public and that 10% of them never reopened after the high point of the pandemic from March and April. We also learn the museum institution industry has a 60% growth from 2012 to 2020 and that means that their importance is ever-growing in both protecting heritage but also give it back to communities and tourists worldwide [9].

The ICOM Report states, from the social perspective of the employees in the museums worldwide, that a total 81.5% of participants stated that less than 25% of staff currently work on-site at the museum. To get a sense of the short-term economic impact of the crisis, 14% of respondents said that at least some of their museums' employees have been furloughed, and 6% have been either laid-off or their temporary contracts not renewed since the lock-down [7].

Sanja Iguman in her contribution to the volume edited by Frederica Burini, *Tourism Facing a Pandemic. From Crisis to Recovery*, reaffirm the dangers that small museums or individual freelancers are exposed to because of the pandemic and how the growth of virtual content could help save the day in the end [3].

NEMO reports come with a very interesting summary of findings from their survey on the European Museums:

1. The majority of museums in Europe and around the globe are closed. A survey of NEMO shows that many museums in Europe are opening their doors to the public again in May/June 2020. Museum operations as we used to know them, however, will not be the same for a long time.

2. 3 out of 5 museums reported losing an average of €20,300 a week due to closure and travel halt. While some museums have found their budget minimally impacted as of yet, many museums reported a considerable loss of income of 75-80%, with larger museums and the museums in touristic areas reporting weekly losses adding up to hundreds of thousands of Euros.

3. The majority of museums in Europe have not had to lay-off staff yet. However, 3 out of 10 museums have put on hold contracts with freelance workers and 3 out of 5 museums have stopped entirely their volunteer programs.

4. Relying on a diversified spectrum of income sources makes museums agile and resilient. However, private income sources are more susceptible to market changes. The survey showed that museums relying mostly on private funding reported greater vulnerability in the past weeks.

5. Museums are directly and heavily impacted by the global decrease in tourism, beyond the immediate crisis. OECD has predicted a 50-70%

decrease in global tourism activities. Considering that cultural tourism accounts for 40% of all European tourism and 4 out of 10 tourists choosing their destination based on its cultural offering, a long-term dramatic decrease of income through museum tickets, shops and cafes is expected to last until the end of 2020.

6. 4 out of 5 museums have increased their digital services to reach their audiences, often by having staff take over new tasks to cope with the circumstances. Almost half of the respondents stated that their museum is now providing one or more new online services.

7. 2 out of 5 museums reported an increase in online visits, ranging between 10 to 150% during the reporting time.

8. Without additional input, there is no increase in the output: Our survey has shown that the museums that were able to change staff tasks and/or add resources were also able to increase their digital services and observed an increase in their online visits.

9. People seek museums because of their education and collections related content. Museums reported that next to social media, both educational and collections related materials, including video and film content, were most popular with online audiences.

10. This survey has evidenced that museums online are important extensions and complements of physical museums, but that a sound metric to benchmark online visits is missing [8].

What to do about it? We found very interesting tips in Seth Frankel's article *Tips and Thoughts for Museums in a COVID World* that emphasizes that people are still the greatest asset and put technology to work to provide great "giveaways" via web and social media platforms like video-based tutorials (such as simple painting classes and similar activities, or in-house made podcasts featuring museum staff/experts, or deeper dives into artefacts). There are great snippets that can delivery real content, not just marketing and teasers [4].

Three main issues came out from a very recent analysis made by Deborah Agostino, Michela Arnaboldi and Antonio Lampis. A first critical issue is linked to mediation and authority over content. The democratisation in communication enabled by social media requires rethinking a museum's customary role of mediation, opening up a series of options, from the more traditional mediation to co-creation. A second important issue relates to the organisational change necessary for managing social media, which requires new skills and processes. The third and final issue that emerged clearly during the COVID-19 pandemic is for social media to be inserted within a wider user experience, where the boundaries between physical and digital

worlds become seamless, according to the new concept of ‘phygital’ (physical + digital) experience [1].

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

Mainly, we tried to obtain from this examination data about on one hand how did the COVID-19 outbreak had affected “Princely Court” N.M.E. day to day activity and on the other hand to measure the possible medium and long time effects of this situation.

Another issue we considered was how did the institution behave and how did it try to reach out to public especially during the lockdown, in Romania 16 March – 14 May 2020, when it came out of it, what were the effects after the lockdown was lifted and, as much as possible, what are the predictions for the near future.

Visitors’ statistics, as well as other economic indicators, are also part of our interest and although is obvious that during the closed period these are close to 0 we will focus more on the period following the lift of the lockdown and that this date can do you help us see in the future.

Of course, we do not pretend that trough our analyses we were able to obtain sociological relevant results nor that we can point out patterns in our results that could have broader applicability. Instead, we consider this an exercise that aims to inform and be useful as source information perhaps for later developments and other researches.

4. Research Methods

As the main research method, we used the comparison using a series of public data but also internal documents of the institution regarding fluctuation in the number of visitors and economic data related to income from independent activities.

To this information, we added some articles and books that helped us to sketch an image about the tradition, development and current situation of “Princely Court” N.M.E. as well as several World Wide Web resources and an overview on the presence of the institution on social media platforms.

In order have a better overview we present a brief S.W.O.T. analysis, too and graphical represented statistics with the number of visitors and the income generated by independent activities.

As a time frame, we put face to face information from 2017 to 2019, in some examples even older data, with the available data from 2020, from January until the end of August.

5. Findings

• According to a S.W.O.T. analysis done by “Princely Court” N.M.E. on the organization itself we can present the following results: [10]

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is the administrator of a rich, varied and representative heritage; - Most of the museums are housed by buildings that are also historical monuments, therefore, are themselves tourist attractions; - It has a unique heritage, based on a national cultural brand, Chindiei Tower, with an image registered at State Office for Inventions and Trademarks; - The existence of a single institution, which includes all the museums of Dâmbovită County, an advantage that allows a unitary policy; - Favourable geographical position; - It organizes various educational projects, which address all categories of people, especially young people; - It has qualified, dynamic and overall young or middle-aged employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insufficient number of employees according to its real needs and its heritage; - Lack of pedestrian signs and street signs to signal the location of museums within the “Princely Court” N.M.E. - Targoviste; - Insufficient knowledge or awareness by the public of Targoviste’s tourist potential situation that extends to all Dambovită County; - A chronic lack of parking places especially for buses in the proximity of the main museum objectives (our addition to the original analysis)
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing public interest in temporary exhibitions and organized educational programs; - Good collaboration with local, national and international cultural operators; - The uniqueness of some of its museum at the national level; - The most important museums within “Princely Court” N.M.E., are located in the central area of Targoviste they become easily accessible; - A noticeable development of the touristic activity in Targoviste; - The increased interest in cultural tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The instability of a legislative framework regarding the protection of the national cultural heritage; - The organization large entertainment events in the protection area of historical monument buildings under the administration of “Princely Court” N.M.E.; - The risk of losing already trained staff, which leaves the field of cultural industries for other better-paid jobs; - The underfunding of proposed projects; - The changing cultural policies at the local level.

Source: PCNME Annual report [10]

• After the brief S.W.O.T analysis we consider of good use an overview of the dynamics of the visitors that “Princely Court” N.M.E. have registered in the time frame of 2009 – 2019:

Graphic 1. Princely Court’ National Museum Ensemble. Visitors’ yearly statistics. 2009 – 2019. **Source:** PCNME Annual report [10]

The next two graphics reveal data on a more detailed level referring and they refer to the visitor’s dynamics for the years 2018 – 2019 compared with the similar months of 2020 (Graphic 2) and the absolute numbers of the income from the main independent activities in the local currency - lei (RON):

Graphic 2. “Princely Court” National Museum Ensemble. Monthly visitors statistics (January – August). 2018 – 2020. **Source:** PCNME Internal report [11]

Graphic 3. Independent activities income.

January to August. 2017 - 2020

Source: PCNME Internal report [11]

Except for hard copy prints like flyers, guides, maps, catalogues, “Princely Court” N.M.E. made use of the virtual space of Wide World Web through its official web site: www.muzeu-dambovitene.ro, at the moment only in Romanian but soon to release an English version, too and in the recent years several Facebook pages that were of real aid during the lockdown and general useful mean to spread information and obtain feedback from the public.

These pages administrated voluntarily by several employees of the institution are Muzeul de Istorie Dambovita [13] with 3755 followers, Curtea Domneasca – Potlogi Dambovita [14] with 1663 followers and Muzeul de Arta Targoviste [15] with 918 followers. As a result of the experience during the look down and of a growing awareness of the increasingly important role that social media will play in the future immediately after social relaxation, two new pages have appeared that promote different aspects of the patrimony in the administration of “Princely Court” N.M.E.: Arheologie medievala in Targoviste [16] with 322 followers and Muzeul Tiparului – Targoviste [17] with 66 followers.

6. Discussions

From the few data we have presented, we can observe in our case study public access dropped down with 1/3 if we compare de the general number of visitors and surely this had a more or less equal effect on institution's income from independent activities but for the months June, July and August 2020, even with the social distancing rules are, in general numbers similar to the year 2018 so one may say that from this point of view the recovery from the look down it is rather good. In absolute numbers things look like this for the time frame June-August, in 2018 there were 103.538 visitors, in 2019: 136.324 and in 2020: 101.147 visitors [11].

How can we explain this situation? We believe that are the specific conditions of this museum institution, shown in the Strengths chapter of the S.W.O.T analysis, allow it to maintain rather large affluence of visitors when others struggle. The main three attractions are open-air museum such as "Princely Court" Ensemble or with have large open-air/capacity for entrance such as Constantin Brancoveanu's Palace from Potlogi or Ialomita's Cave.

We cannot ignore the very well position of Targoviste on the north-south travel route from Bucharest to the mountain resorts in the southern Carpathians.

As we anticipated in the previous chapter the role of the social media as a way of remaining in the public's eye is also a part of the explanation for the rather mild transition and fast recovery of the museum activity with public.

Following an earlier collaboration Princely Court National Museums Ensemble also was allowed to promote itself and remain visible to public's eye on the Facebook page of the TV show Aventura Urbana (Urban Adventure)[18], broadcasted by Romanian Television Broadcast Company (TVR). Its Facebook page has 6923 followers and promoted Princely Court National Museums Ensemble with self-made filmed materials about lesser-known attractions such Art Museum Vasile Bleandea and Art Museum Gheorghe Petrascu or the newly opened Romance Museum on the days of 9 [19] and 10 [20] April 2020 and on 13 April [21] with an impressive overview of the Princely Court Ensemble with no visitors.

The income from independent activities was heavier hit by the pandemic crisis with a drop out of approx. 1/3 compared to the year 2017 and 2018 and with approx. 65% to the absolute numbers of 2019 for the timeframe June-August (for exact numbers see above Graphic 3)

7. Conclusions

Valuing its strengths, “Princely Court” National Museums Ensemble managed to cope with the difficult period that all cultural and entertainment institutions go through, which largely depend on the budget allocations in the case of some and on a consistent contribution of financing from independent activities. The figures tend to show a strong recovery in the last two months considered, July and August. If the situation does not deteriorate significantly, we consider that the forecast for September and October remains an optimistic one, making possible for the public to enjoy history and nature alike in the objectives administered by the institution in good conditions of epidemiological safety. Certainly, the closed exhibition spaces will recover slower than the outdoor spaces or those that allow access to social distance even greater than the legal provisions. We note that the existence of this museum complex that is “Princely Court” National Museums Ensemble is the chance that otherwise niche museums such as the author museum or memorial houses or those that for objective reasons often failed to bring their exhibition space in the 21st century to survive and offer to the public all they have of the best. The digitization of the heritage and an increased dynamics using popular communication tools will know in the future an increasing application in the activity of museums and from this point of view COVID-19 can be an opportunity, not just a plague.

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