



**CD-ETA**  
Interreg Europe



European Union  
European Regional  
Development Fund

**Digitization of Natural and Cultural Heritage  
in Conditions of COVID-19 Pandemic  
Interregional Workshop  
State-of-Art  
Bulgaria**

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**Online 09/11/2021**

# The begining:

- March 8th, 2020 - First declared case of COVID-19 in Bulgaria;
- March 13th, 2020 - Bulgarian Government declared emergency state throughout the country for a period of one month, which on April 3rd was extended to May 13th, 2020;
- May 14th, 2020 - An emergency epidemic situation was declared by the Bulgarian Government, being updated till today.
- Numbers are not everything...



- All kinds of mass events were suspended, including sports, cultural, entertainment and scientific events (cinemas, theaters, concerts, museums, conferences, symposia, sports and SPA centers, gyms, etc.).
- Classes and all extracurricular activities in schools, universities and other educational institutions and organizations were suspended and a distance form of training was introduced.



One year and a half later...





## Museums...



- Museums in Bulgaria report over BGN 2.5 million/EUR 1.3 millions in losses due to the pandemic for the three months in which the museums did not work in 2020, and this is only from the entrance fees, which were not realized;
- It is important to note that in the remaining months the museums were open, but again in pandemic conditions, and respectively the revenue from visitors was again reduced due to the restriction of group visits;
- Many museums in Bulgaria have virtual tours of their sites and visitors can take advantage to view their exhibitions.
- As for the digitalization of museums in general, Bulgarian museums are far behind in comparison with museums in other countries.

# Our stakeholders' personal experience: Regional Military Historical Museum Panorama Plevna Epopee

Regional Military Historical Museum Panorama Plevna Epopee is an art museum in Plevna, built in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Liberation of Plevna from Ottoman slavery. It is included in the 100 National Tourist Sites.

Since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, the sites of Regional Military History Museum were closed for visits for about 3 months. As a result the number of Bulgarian visitors, including students decreased 3 times, and the number of foreign tourists decreased almost 10 times. Although it was not needed staff reduction. Staff members for who it was applicable switched to remote work.

In terms of digital solution, on the occasion of Bulgarian National Holiday, March 3, and with the logistical assistance of Municipality of Plevna, in the period February- March 2021, were held 13 virtual tours in the Museum with a total number of participants about 1300 - students and adults.

With the support of Municipality of Plevna, Regional Military Historical Museum and RIM-Plevna applied with a project for "Digitally accessible sites of cultural heritage in Plevna Municipality" in partnership with Bulgarian-Norwegian Society - Oslo, Norway. The project is under programme "Cultural Entrepreneurship, Heritage and Cooperation", Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area 2014-2021.



# Our stakeholders' personal experience: Regional Historical Museum

Regional History Museum was founded in 1903. The main fund of the museum includes over 180,000 museum units. Among the functions of the museum are search, research, presentation, protection and promotion of cultural monuments, natural specimens, flora and fauna on the territory of Pleven and Lovech. The museum also has a natural science exhibition.

The pandemic affected the work of the Museum in terms of decreased number of visitors – respectively the financial incomes decreased dramatically in times of shutting down of the building. The regular work with students in the dedicated learning room in the Museum has been suspended. But because of the state funding of the institution it was not needed to cut the staff. Museum team used mostly social media and their website to reach the public during the closing. Permanent expositions of artefacts are placed in the outer yard, where a safe open air access to cultural heritage was available. Also there many events and concerts were organized for the people searching for cultural experience. Museum team work actively on the digitization of its museum units – it was bought museum software and work on the digitization is in progress.





## Galleries...



- Despite the challenges posed by the unprecedented crisis, many institutions and professionals have continued to serve communities by devising new ways to ensure access to culture. After being shut down by the imposed measures, they not only began to use their existing online resources and social media pages more actively, but also delivered new content - virtual exhibitions, curatorial discussions and 3D tours of their galleries via streaming platforms;
- Galleries started from the very beginning with the presentation of the authors of exhibitions in international art platforms and in this sense were proactive;
- The number of art users on the Internet has increased. Maybe people limited themselves to other types of emotional or visual stimuli and focused a little more on art;
- The trend that stands out in the municipal galleries in the smaller cities in the country is on the outflow of audience from the galleries. The purpose of these galleries does not fall on sales, but rather on the possibility of access to culture and live contact with art. Most regular visitors are adults or the older generation and it seems that somehow, unfortunately, the pandemic has moved them away from the gallery;
- However, most of the galleries' efforts are focused on returning people to the gallery with intellectual blows - a strong program with interesting authors who have not been presented or things that have not been seen before.

# Our stakeholders' personal experience: Art Gallery "Iliya Beshkov", Pleven

Founded in 1958 on the initiative of the artists working in the city as a branch of the Historical Museum - Pleven, Art Gallery "Iliya Beshkov" is housed in a building specially built for it in 1978.

The pandemic affected their work to such an extent that the team partially worked remotely, and regarding the audience - there was a period when gallery did not work on Saturday, which was the biggest inconvenience for visitors who could not come at other times to browse the gallery. There was a limit on the number of visitors relative to the space, but because the exhibition space is large, this limit did not affect work process, visitors did not have to wait outside and enter in groups.

Team of the gallery used digital solution for its active online presence – promotion campaigns in social medias and prepared digital catalogues descriptions for internal use. In terms of digitalization, the gallery wants to developed a virtual permanent exhibition.





## Natural and Historical sites...





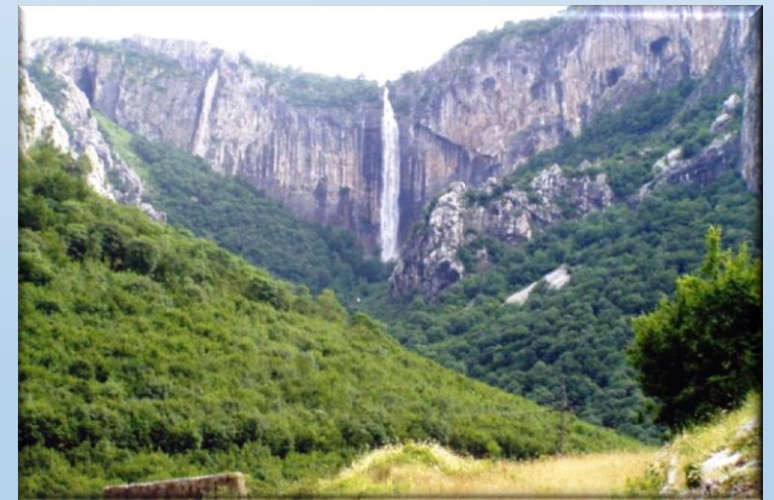
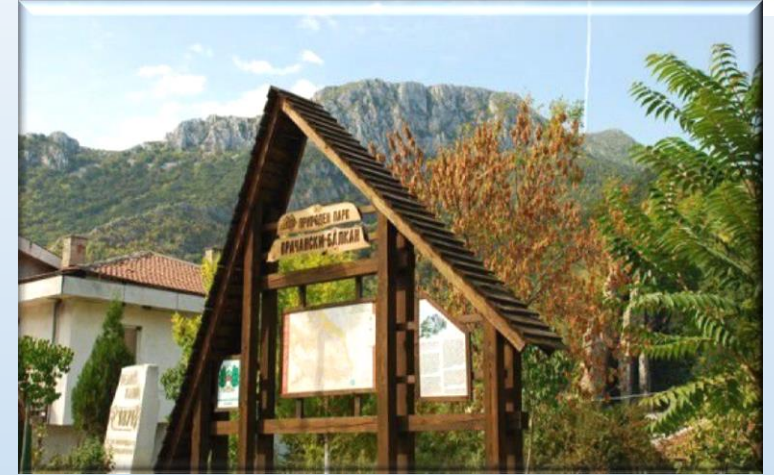
- Right after the Government declared emergency state, the parks, mountains and all places for walks and tourism was forbidden for visitations. One month later the ban was canceled;
- After the bans for visitation of the open air places for tourism and walks were canceled, all bodies managing such objects of natural and cultural heritage report considerable increase of the visitors;
- Some institutions were ready to apply digital tools to keep contact with audience, others were not prepared enough to go virtual. All of them confess that it was very challenging to replace the physical and social contact with online connection, but agree on the wide range of opportunities provided by the digital solutions.

# Our stakeholders' personal experience: Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park

Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park covers a large territory in Northwestern Bulgaria is one of the most popular and preferred objects of Bulgarian natural heritage for recreation and tourism.

COVID-19 Pandemic had a rather neutral impact on the work of the park. The park usually doesn't generate incomes and no financial damages were reported and no staff reduction was needed. Due to the measures for physical distance it was limited the work with children groups, also was closed the Youth Eco Camp. However the summer season had extremely positive impact and the tourist flow increased significantly.

The park managing team fully agree on the digital presentation benefits and worked actively on digitization of the park within project DiGiPARKS – 3D digital models were developed and significant sites of natural and cultural heritage in the park were digitized and remotely accessible for free. The visitor center has a modern digital demonstration hall and technologies will allow "flight" over the park, selecting and "visiting" specific sites of cultural and natural heritage in virtual reality.



# Our stakeholders' personal experience: Belogradchik Rocks

Belogradchik Fortress is a fortress located next to the city of Belogradchik. The fortress is the biggest cultural landmark in the region. The main tourist flow of the region is directed to the Belogradchik fortress and to the Belogradchik rocks. Belogradchik Fortress is one of the best preserved fortresses in Bulgaria and has been declared a cultural monument of national importance. The fortress was built at the time of the Roman Empire.

The restrictions imposed due to the pandemic decreased considerably the financial incomes in times when the access to the Rocks was banned or limited. Although no staff reduction was necessary. After the restrictions were loose it was obvious the increase of the people interest for close touch with the cultural and natural heritage and the number of visits at the Rocks increased. No digital tools were used during the times of shutting down, but there are endeavors in this direction for the future.

According bodies managing the Belogradchik Rocks it is important to achieve a balance approach, so the access to cultural and natural heritage not to be restricted.





## Our stakeholders' personal experience: Tsarevets - Architectural and historical reserve



*Tsarevets is a hill in the city of Veliko Tarnovo, as well as a fortress of the same name in medieval Tarnovgrad. It was the main Bulgarian fortress during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, when Tarnovo was the capital of the kingdom.*

Tsarevets Architectural and Museum Reserve was CLOSED for visits from March 21, 2020 for almost a month.

The global coronavirus pandemic has had a serious impact on the attendance of museum sites in Veliko Tarnovo. In 2020 there was a 34% decrease compared to 2019. In 2021 the situation began to normalize and there is a very large positive jump. In 2019 and previous years, visitors were an average of about 500 thousand per year, of which 1/3 foreigners. Due to restrictions during the 2020 visitations are mainly individual - organized and transitory groups of foreigners are missing but on the other hand, the number of Bulgarian tourists has increased. In order to prolong the stay of the guests of Veliko Tarnovo, from the beginning of July to the end of September the Municipality and the Municipal Tourism Agency "Tsarevgrad Tarnov" offer every Saturday night free broadcasting of the audio-visual program "Tsarevgrad Tarnov - sound and light". Hotels also advertise these broadcasts.

The crisis led to increasing of the entrance tickets price by 40%.





## Libraries and Archives...



*"Today, when the world is gripped by an unprecedented spread of the new coronavirus and people are in isolation, reading is becoming a key tool for raising cultural and educational knowledge. Right now the work of the libraries in remote mode is gaining great importance, because we are realizing it in new conditions with the help of modern information technologies."*

**~ National Library "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" ~**

Bulgarian Library Association reacted immediately after WHO declared the world pandemic and announced changes aimed at safety working environment as follows:

- Using face masks, gloves and protective face screens; Schedule for disinfection of the premises;
- Some of them were related to migration of services usually provided into the premises from physical into online;
- Limited reading time for the visitors;
- Reorganization of library premises aiming to control the visitors flows and number;
- Placing guidance signs and instructions;
- Distance;
- Measures for disinfection of the books returned/touched; (from 24 hours to 14 days); Purchase of special disinfection UV lamps;
- New digital products;
- Virtual programs;
- Thematic COVID collections;

Even after the imposed restrictions are cancelled, the distance (home) work will be encouraged until the end of the pandemic, through establishment of new organizational procedures and increasing the number of distance/digital services provided.







Besides the restrictions, the pandemic situation has also led to a number of positive changes and acceleration of digitalization processes through enhanced creation of digital resources, expanding the range of services and providing access to them in the network:

The efforts of the employees from direction "Information provision of library activities" were aimed at improving the quality of application of information technology in the various activities of the National Library, as well as the state of computer equipment and local area network for better customer service and optimization.

Innovation in Varna Library: The first Bulgarian Library providing service for book rent without physical contact or entering library premises using "Bibliomat", after preliminary request. (48 hours in advance).

The Dimitar Talev Regional Library in Blagoevgrad has purchased a UV lamp to clean and disinfect the books returned - up to 6 books are placed inside, standing for 30 seconds for complete disinfection.

The Regional Library in Veliko Tarnovo launched a new online service - "Delivery of books to homes" during the state of emergency.

Due to COVID-19 all Bulgarian libraries were closed for a certain periods. The libraries decreased the number of usual services provided and quit the programmes planned (mainly for promotion of reading and information literacy).

*Generally the pandemic led to 30% decreasing of a number of books borrowed from the libraries.*



## Similar safety rules in force for the Archives:

- The service of readers is carried out in compliance with all the requirements for social distance, disinfection, wearing a mask and individual gloves;
- Readers must state in advance by e-mail or telephone by the State Archives their wish to visit a reading room;
- Visitors with visible signs of physical illness are not allowed in the building of the State Archives;
- Firstly, only one visitor was allowed for reference in the reading room, later the number of visitors allowed was increased up to the half capacity of the room. Obligatory: using personal pen to enter and sign the registers.
- After use, the archive documents are placed in a separate room for a period of 72 hours, before returning to the archive and providing them for use by another reader.





As all the other cultural institutions, the State Archives met various difficulties such as temporary closure of the reading rooms, to cancel a number of exhibitions. But on the other hand, the time of forced stay in homes due to the imposed restrictive measures, seems to have created an opportunity to look into the past - both in the family and in society as a whole, especially in the older generations coming to the conclusion that there is no better guardian of national and family memory than the state archives.

*"We live in a time when printed text is being replaced by virtual text. And this is really a big challenge - to electronically store every document from today, because in the future it will remain the only source by which history will be studied,"* said Associate Professor. Mihail Gruev, Chairman of the State Archives Agency (SAA).

# Our stakeholders' personal experience: State Archive – District of Pleven

State Archive – Pleven was established in 1952 as responsible for the selection, collation, registering, processing, storage and the provision for use of the documents designated for permanent preservation of district administration, municipalities from Pleven region, territorial structures of the state bodies and other state and municipal institutions, organizations and important personalities of local significance, as well as the scientific and methodological guidance.

Since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, the sites of State Archive Pleven was closed for visits for a very short time. The institution worked in compliance with all the state and structural safety rules. Part of the staff members switched to online work but soon was realized that it was not effective having in mind the nature of their work. Even during the most complicate pandemic period, the Archive still worked with physical visitors after preliminary request but only person was allowed in the reading room.

Although the physical visitations were limited, the State Archive Pleven declares highly increased interest and online requests. In terms of digital solutions, based on CD-ETA Action plan of project LP, the State Archive Pleven implemented project „Positive memories from the old times” funded by National fund “Culture”. Within the project was established and equipped local digitization center aiming to speed the process of digitization of archive paper collections. The center works effectively even after project closure and facilitates institutional activity during the pandemic conditions.



## Intangible Heritage...





# Our stakeholders' personal experience: Folklore Dances Ensemble “Rainbow”

The Ensemble is a private dance formation and has dancers from all ages – children and adults.

COVID-19 Pandemic had a dramatic impact on their activity – for several months the rehearsals were forbidden, concerts were forbidden. Later the restrictive measures got loosed and public performances were allowed but with participation of 30 % or 50% of the audience. Financial incomes decreased with 50%.

Because of the collective and emotional character of the folklore dances, it was not possible for the dancers to practice their activity separately and individually during the restrictions and it was difficult to keep their good fit without joint trainings. Chief choreographer tried to organize the rehearsals through an online platform, but failed to attract the interest of the dancers, because they didn't have personal contact and the emotional feedback missed. The younger ones and most of the children soon lost motivation and interest to dance.

In 2020 the Ensemble had totally 2 concerts in comparison to approx. 8 concerts in an ordinary year without restrictions.



# Thank you for attention!

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