

INVISIBLE DAMAGE:

Cultural centres across Europe warn against severe long-term effects on the foundations of socio-cultural work



As we enter a new year, the challenges experienced through the unprecedented global pandemic persist. In most countries, the plight of cultural organisations has not been a priority, despite massive impacts on the entire sector.

At the time of writing, the vast majority of ENCC members, and of all cultural and community centres in Europe, are operating behind closed doors. Our national networks are struggling to support their members in terms of rights, information and advocacy towards policymakers. On their own level, the local cultural centres have been juggling for months between virtual and face-to-face activities, inventing ways to adapt to constantly-changing rules and plans.

Before the December holidays, many countries implemented a second lockdown which brought with it old and new obstacles. This report will emphasize the current main challenges faced



by cultural centres across Europe. These challenges force centres to ask critical questions about how to proceed in three key areas: (1.) mounting financial instability, (2.) motivating and retaining cultural centre staff, and (3) keeping the relationship alive with artists, communities and audiences, which is the foundation of their work. In concluding, we'll gather some recommendations by members on how the policy level can support cultural centres and socio-cultural work on the medium and long terms.

'If this state of things lasts only for a month, we will overcome it. But we won't be able to do it for long'.

In terms of challenges, there is first a continuing level of financial instability felt throughout our membership. On-and-off venue closures and the reluctance of audiences to participate in live cultural events has made revenue from ticket and concession sales plunge. Even those of our members who have public operational funding are fragilized. 'Belgian cultural centres are not under an obligation to be systematically profitable', explains Céline D'Ambrosio from the Association des Centres Culturels (ACC), 'but if for six months we run all activities at a loss, this will become a problem. So far, salaries have been covered by our subsidies, but external interventions are usually financed through ticketing and café/bar revenues'. Liene Kubilus, director of the VEF Culture Palace in Riga, put it simply: '[At present] we are not generating

any revenues. If this state of things lasts only for a month, we will overcome it. But we won't be able to do it for long'.

The crisis has also underscored the role our centres play in the fragile cultural ecosystem. They employ many freelance workers and artists, who are now feeling the worst effects of the restrictions. Leen Vanderschueren from cult!, the network for cultural houses in Flanders and Brussels, wrote, 'Having to go in cultural lockdown (now the second time) has had repercussions on the whole value chain, mainly divided into cultural workers, the public, and the artists. But we can't forget the others connected to this value chain: the producers, bookers, and the precarious jobs like freelancers and technicians'. Though at first many networks of cultural centres were calling on their members to support freelancers and artists by paying them for cancelled events, Leen added now: 'Financially it is definitely not possible for centres to do this systematically. There are just too many cancelled events. Cultural centres are afraid that in the long run, the situation won't be viable. In Flanders, 19% of centres are already in need of financial support at this time'.

Access to relief packages is unequal, complex and frustrating. Many initial aides were not explicitly designed for the cultural sector, much less cultural centres. Silvena Bayrakova, from the Chitalishta Union network in Bulgaria, wrote: 'For example, one of our [national] programs includes a budget for cleaning machines and hygienic supplies. But as cultural organizations, our members cannot apply for the money in spite of the fact that we work with children

and elderly people, and that it's very expensive to set up new standards on disinfection and cleaning'. Writing about the European funding level, Aleks Valta, from the Association of



Cultural Centre Kulturanova, Novi Sad, Serbia

Finnish Children's Cultural Centers in Tampere, remarked: 'As a small association, we constantly face administrative challenges with applying European projects. The call for COVID-19 strategic partnerships was supposed to be a quick and easy application, but it took us weeks to prepare it'.

'Cultural workers are just exhausted after nearly a year of constantly changing working conditions'

Secondly, in combination with managing the growing level of financial instability, centres must find ways to motivate and support their

staff. 'Cultural workers are just exhausted after nearly a year of constantly changing working conditions', wrote Yvonne Gimpel of IG Culture Austria, (...) 'many consider leaving the cultural sector altogether.' Quoting the results of a recent member survey, in which 64% of respondents needed to exchange more with colleagues and 46% needed a clearly identified support point, Leen Vanderschueren from cult! said: 'It is clear that mental wellbeing is being challenged. Cultural centre directors face the highest work pressure, and they are afraid of burnouts in their teams'. Céline D'Ambrosio, from the ACC, described the lack of team motivation as 'a loss of meaning and of direct links with the community. If there is no audience, how do you keep moving forward with artistic projects?'

'We are now at risk of losing the foundations of all cultural initiatives: locally based infrastructures, an experienced workforce, but also audiences, including the next generation.'

Which brings us to a third and crucial point: the strong negative impact on the relationship between cultural centres and their communities. 'The contact with audiences is deeply changed', wrote Silvena Bayrakova. Céline D'Ambrosio added: 'The main question is how to do physical distancing when the core 'business' of cultural centres is sharing and proximity?' Yvonne Gimpel noted that the problem goes hand in hand with a lack of public awareness. 'The public debate



Leen Vanderschueren from cult! network, Belgium

on culture has tended to focus solely on the extremes: on one side the artists, on the other the largest cultural institutions and houses. There is no awareness of everything in between, as if culture was limited to artists performing in large theatre, opera or concert houses in front of passive audiences. [This is] neglecting all the efforts of socio-cultural work, of locally rooted cultural initiatives, of participatory approaches to cultural work, and much more. From our point of view, it is a very, very dangerous development with severe long-term effects for the sector as a whole.' She warned: 'We are now at risk of losing the foundations of all cultural initiatives: locally based infrastructures, an experienced workforce, but also audiences, including the next generations.'

'Cultural centres are ready to reinvent themselves', concluded Céline D'Ambrosio, to evolve and to find new ways to connect citizens and help them live together. But for that, they need a clear framework and perspectives. To be

able to continue to work and exercise a socio-cultural role, you need a clear horizon, solid financial bases and political representatives who stand up for the cultural sector.'

HOW POLICYMAKERS CAN SUPPORT CULTURAL CENTRES ON MEDIUM TO LONG TERM

- Create a financial guarantee for the cultural sector
- Reinforce regional funds such as FEDER
- Raise visibility for culture on the policy and public debate level
- When talking about culture, don't focus only on creation by and promotion of artists - think also cultural action at local levels (including in non-urban areas), mediation, outreach and other aspects of socio-cultural work
- Create simplified working grants for cultural initiatives which allow them to explore new ways of participatory culture in times of crisis
- Work to strengthen democratic aspects of culture. Support cooperation models reaching beyond the cultural sector, explicitly inviting cooperative work between activists/NGOs/researchers and cultural initiatives/artists on topics like sustainability, inequalities, diversity and polarization

Recognition and concrete support is needed for socio-cultural work.

The ENCC will continue representing the realities of sociocultural centres and providing visibility to the impact of their work on society. We are aware as a network that to achieve long-lasting changes, we need to build new alliances and tighten existing ones, working together to highlight the value of the cultural sector and its potential for positive innovation. This is why, within this new context, together with our members, we have started to rethink the way we operate and relate to our surroundings, focusing especially on diversity and sustainability as a way out of the crisis. Yet for socio-cultural organisations to first survive and then implement systemic changes on the medium and long terms, we need and call for both recognition and concrete support, not only from the cultural ecosystem, but also and especially from policymakers within European Union institutions and Member States, as well as regional and local authorities.

This report was compiled from feedback with ENCC members who are also regional or national networks, gathered at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. It was written and edited by Ryan Brinkey and Lucie Perineau from the ENCC coordination office.

Photography credits: Thomas Bernardet (p.2), Kulturanova (p.3), Roselien Beerten (p. 4)

Find out more about the networks quoted in the report:

[Association des Centres Culturels de la Communauté française de Belgique](#)

[Association of Cultural Centres of French-Speaking Belgium], Belgium

[Latvijas Kultūras darbinieku biedrība](#)

[Association of Latvian Cultural Centres of Latvia], Latvia

[Съюз на народните читалища](#) [Chitalista Union], Bulgaria

[cult! netwerk kultuur huizen](#) [Network of Culture Houses in Flanders and Brussels], Belgium

[IG Kultur Österreich](#), Austria

[Suomen lastenkulttuurikeskusten liitto ry](#)

[Association of Finnish Cultural Centers for Children], Finland

[RD IKSD VEF Kultūras pils](#) [VEF Culture Palace], Latvia



European Network of Cultural Centres
Galerie Ravenstein, 28
1000 Brussels, Belgium

office@encc.eu
<https://encc.eu/>

The European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC) unites local, regional and national networks of cultural centres across the EU for capacity building, interconnection and advocacy. Our 60 members represent over 5000 cultural centres throughout Europe. We believe that active participation in arts and culture on an individual level brings personal but also societal development.

Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

