Universities and Socio-cultural Institutions in Highly Uncertain Contexts: Challenges and Opportunities during COVID-19 in three Western Balkan Countries

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Summary

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious challenges to the territorial governance of social services across the globe, as well as in the Western Balkans (WB). SARS-CoV-2, being a virus that primarily attacks the respiratory system and spreads through breathing or close contact has required governments to apply strong policies of physical distancing. Schools, libraries, museums, and other socio-cultural services closed and are now gradually re-opening. Because of the distancing policies, several initiatives were taken to quickly shift these services online. These initiatives, though temporary as a result of the crisis, may pose interesting prospects for future policies in terms of increasing the resilience of these services as well as institutionalizing new ways, norms, and practices of doing things.

This paper investigates the different policies and practices that were applied in WB countries in the university and cultural sector through a desk study. The cases presented are based on official documents, websites, and social media profiles of the representative institutions in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Keywords: COVID-19, Uncertainty, Universities, Cultural Sector, Western Balkans

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Introduction

What started as a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) outbreak in Wuhan, China has now developed into a global pandemic, dubbed COVID-19. The virus has spread to 217 countries and territories worldwide, infecting over 54,000,000 and has cost the lives of more than 1,300,000 people (WHO, 2020)[1]. This is primarily a respiratory infection transferred via droplets and able to survive on multiple surfaces for several days.

The widespread effects of the pandemic prompted many countries to develop new rules and restrictions to maintain social distancing, such as pausing mass gathering activities, as well as closing schools, museums, libraries, and several other (indoor) facilities. The COVID-19 outbreak has also affected Western Balkan countries, based on World Health Organization (WHO) data. All countries have placed similar restrictions on activities with the aim of increasing social distancing. This has also been conditioned by the challenges that the low development of the health sector faces in the WB (Matković, 2017). Hence, tertiary education institutions, museums, and libraries all closed for at least two months beginning in March 2020. Most of these services had to adapt to the new circumstances and transfer some of their activities online, while others tried to further support existing online services. Following a two-month period, between March-May, the activities started to slowly re-open in all countries of the Western Balkan.

The pandemic's situation remains uncertain and so do the directives on education and cultural activities. The changes in the performance of the system (and the backtracking) reflect the immense pressure from the continuously growing numbers of COVID-19 cases. Both the university and cultural sectors in the three countries were shut down in the initial phase of the pandemic and are now faced with the challenges of reopening their activities. While all three countries tried to loosen measures during the summer months, with

the winter months looming closer the is still great uncertainty regarding the conduct of these sectors in the near future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the importance of adaptive planning and resilience in territorial governance discourse. The unknowns and uncertainties associated with the evolution of the pandemic are high and no clear answer can be given regarding its duration, the time it will take to develop a vaccine, and its success. This is testing governance capacities at all levels in attempts to adapt to the situation. On the one hand, debates regarding the health sector and the economic recovery after the pandemic are highly elaborated in the media. On the other hand, the socio-cultural and education sectors often get less attention, even though these two sectors are related to development. The OECD (2020) highlights the impacts that the COVID-19 crisis poses on WB countries not only in terms of the economy, but throughout all sectors including education, tourism, healthcare, digitalisation, and employment. The pandemic is expected to pose serious challenges considering the level of development and the adaptive capacity of these sectors in the WB region.

With the removal of restrictive measures in WB countries, the number of people affected by COVID-19 has drastically increased. Currently, there are general guidelines and protocols (MASR and ASCAP, 2020) for the (partial) reopening of the education sector in general and for universities specifically. With regards to universities, the ministry is providing recommendations to continue with online teaching but allowing universities to issue their own guidelines. Concerns remain high regarding health and safety in the auditoriums and the quality of service. The same concerns relate to the socio-cultural sectors. The spread of COVID-19 has placed several pressures on the above-mentioned sectors. At the same time, these pressures can be considered as an opportunity to improve services.

This paper analyses the responses to the pandemic for the tertiary education sector

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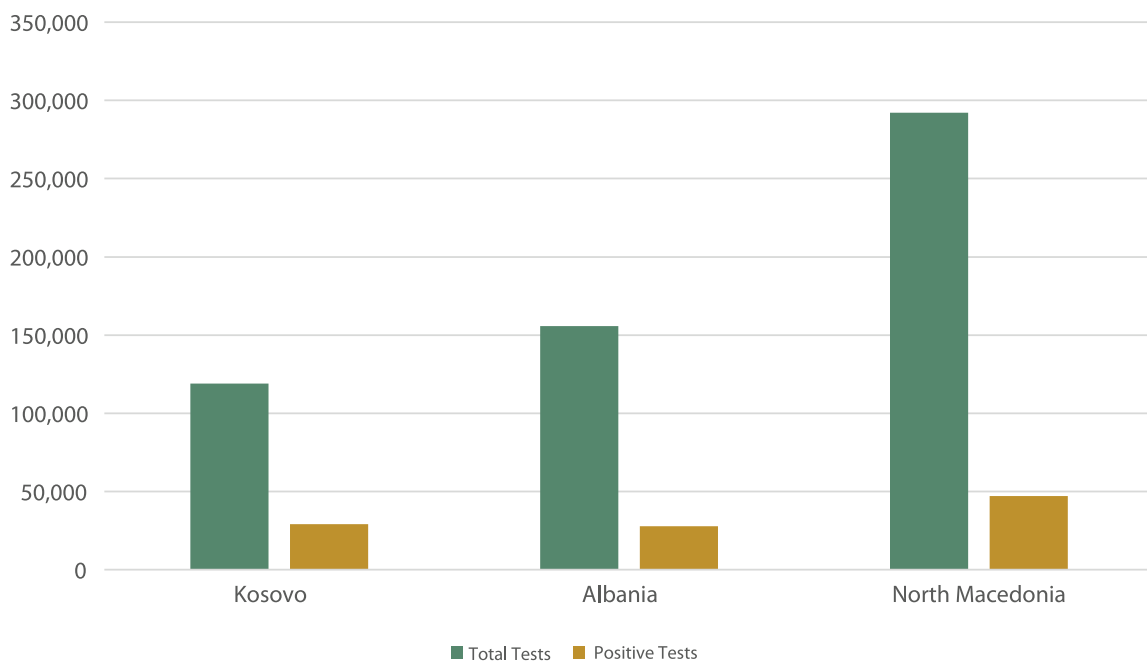
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and the socio-cultural sector through a comparison of selected cases from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. For each country, the analysis has focused on two universities, the national museums, national art galleries, and national libraries in order for the comparison to be coherent. This is a rather limited sample aimed at developing an understanding of trends and practices. Furthermore, online, semi-structured interviews ensured limited feedback, therefore most of the analysis is based on a review of activities published on the official websites of the institutions and their main channels of communication in social media. This is a preliminary attempt to understand some of the practices implemented during and soon after the pandemic's restriction, and the possibility for these activities to be extended into the future. It is important to highlight that the COVID-19 situation is still evolving, with high levels of uncertainty regarding its spread. Hence, this paper captures a moment in time, i.e. the timeframe between March and November 2020. Additionally, the considerations in this paper are important in light of the prospect of COVID-19 continuing into the autumn and winter of 2020-2021.

COVID-19 Situation in the Western Balkans

In Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, the trend of the virus' spread has deteriorated between June and November 2020 compared to the period between March and May 2020, mainly due to reopening activities. These trends can also be seen in the ratio of infected cases against the numbers of tests conducted where, in Kosovo, around 24,44% tests returned positive; in Albania, around 17,88 %; and in North Macedonia, around 16,10%.
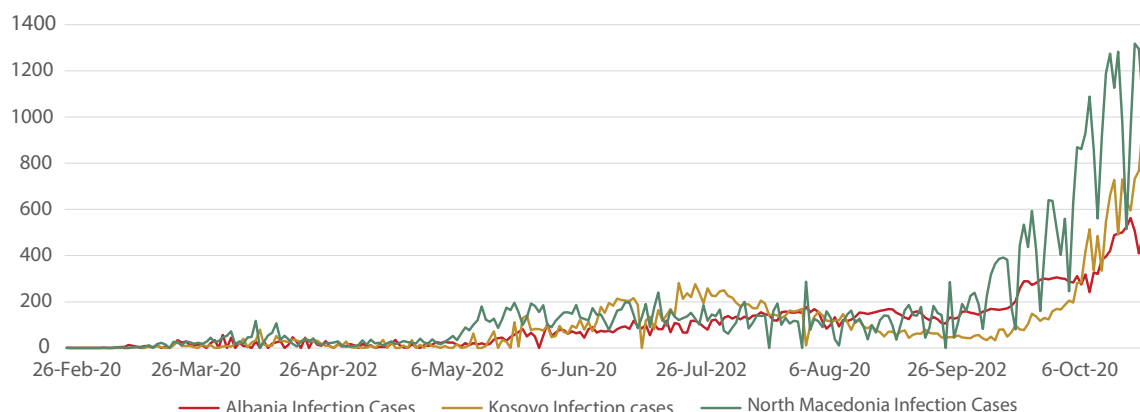
Figure 1. Trend of infections against number of tests in three countries

Source: Authors, based on WHO data.

In all three countries, the number of infections has doubled and the number of fatalities is also considerably higher when comparing the February-to-May figures to the ones from June-to-November.

Figure 2 provides an overview of daily infections between March and November 2020 based on the data referred to WHO, followed by short country descriptions.

Figure 2. COVID-19 daily cases in three countries

Source: Authors, based on WHO 2020 data. [2]

Albania

The first COVID-19 case in Albania was registered on March 9, 2020. Since then, the government of Albania has developed a series of legal acts[3] by declaring the state of natural disaster for one month over the whole territory and then extending it for two more months, which restricted all activities until May 18, 2020. From March 9, 2020 until November 15, 2020, Albania recorded 27,830 cases and 623 deaths (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020). Most cases have been registered in Tirana and the main cities such as Durrës, Fier, Shkodër, Lezhë, Korçë, and Vlorë, while in other parts of the country there have been fewer cases (Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Albania, 2020). The first measures implemented immediately after the confirmation of the first cases included the suspension of travel to and from northern Italy. Then, with a special decree[4], the government ordered for the closure of all educational institutions (public and private) for two weeks. All sporting, cultural events, and other large public gatherings were cancelled for a period of three weeks. As the number of confirmed cases increased, the government decided to implement almost complete curfew hours for the entire country, giving health authorities a chance to better monitor the suspected cases. However, since most of the restrictions have been lifted again, COVID-19 cases have quickly spiked with a daily mean rate of 597 new recorded

cases, based on reports from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection. Between June 12 and November 15, 2020, numbers have almost tripled, with over 27,000 recorded cases and over 600 casualties (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020). Compared to the initial stage, when the pandemic spread mostly in high-density urban areas, there is now an evident increase in smaller cities and rural areas (Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Albania, 2020b).

North Macedonia

North Macedonia confirmed its first case on February 26, 2020. 47,050 cases and 1305 deaths were recorded between March 9, 2020 and November 15, 2020 in North Macedonia (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020b). At the beginning of the outbreak, the government closed all schools, educational institutions, cultural premises, restaurants, and non-essential stores. Only food stores, pharmacies, and stores allowing sufficient physical distancing remained open. Starting on May 8, 2020, some shops were authorized to open, provided they had the infrastructure to maintain sufficient physical distance between customers. On May 13, 2020, the government decided to allow shopping malls to open under strict sanitary conditions. By decision of the government, shops are mandated to maintain strict sanitary rules, such as distancing, use of hydroalcoholic gel dispensers, and masks

for employees for at least 200 days following the end of the state of emergency. The state of emergency was declared, on May 13, 2020, with a government decree to impose it. Similarly, to Albania after the re-opening of activities, North Macedonia has shown a drastic increase in new recorded cases and casualties. From June to November 2020, the number of recorded cases has increased to 47,050 with 1305 casualties (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020b). This abrupt increase in numbers has obliged the government to go back to more restrictive measures.

Kosovo

In Kosovo, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was registered on the March 13, 2020. From March 13 to November 15, 2020 Kosovo has recorded 29,805 cases and 883 deaths (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020c). On March 12, 2020, the government created the Special Commission for the Prevention of Infection from COVID-19 on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo[5]. Initial measures included milder restrictions for public activities, public gatherings, and businesses, though refrained from shutting them down completely. The only suspended categories were schools[6] and public events (instructed to be held without public audiences). Measures progressively became stricter until the beginning of June. In the period between June 2020 and August 2020, with the reopening of activities and the border, Kosovo registered an increase in rates of infections and casualties. Especially in late July, the average number of new daily cases recorded was 282, followed by an enormous increase of infections on late October (418 new daily cases) and November 15, 2020 with 501 new daily cases (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020c). Casualties from COVID-19 have escalated as well, reaching 833. These increases are putting significant pressure on the health sector while the government contemplates the implementation of new restrictive measures.
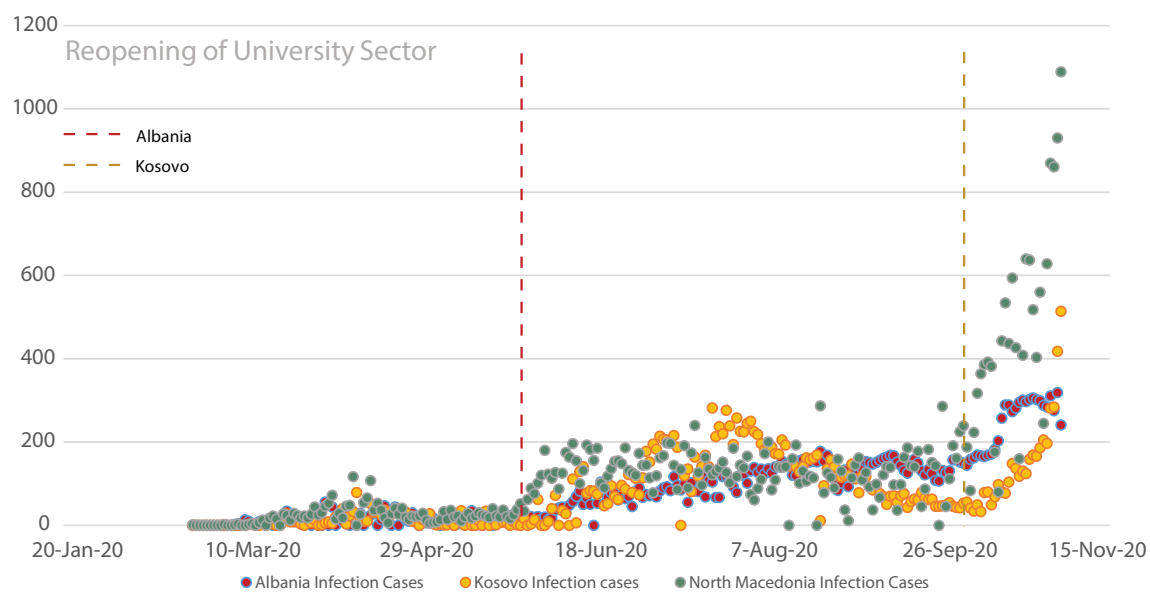
COVID-19 and Universities[7]

In all three countries, as soon as the first official case of infection was declared, higher education activities in auditoriums were suspended, as per government orders.[3&6] The quick and abrupt halt, combined with the uncertainty of the length of the lockdown (Figure 3), posed a serious challenge to universities in terms of finishing the academic year and offering their services to students. In Albania, compared to Kosovo and North Macedonia, the challenge was even greater as the academic year had already been disrupted for a month in the main universities, due to the November 26, 2019 earthquake hitting the Tirana-Durrës region. In addition to classrooms and other facilities, student dormitories were not accessible across the three countries.

Nevertheless, and amid the uncertainties of the time, universities demonstrated a quick response to the situation. In the six universities under study, all classroom activities were shifted online. None of these universities offered any online classes prior to COVID-19, and hence the change was sudden and quickly became a new norm. All universities, initially, used free platforms for their online classes such as *Skype, ZOOM, Webex, Gotomeeting*, and *Google Classroom*, among others. These platforms also quickly evolved to improve their services and offer more user-friendly interfaces and security features suitable to online teaching.

Online lectures initially seemed like a temporary solution to the situation. However, with the evolution of the pandemic and prolongation of quarantine, it became clear that online teaching would last longer than initially planned. Thus, universities also had to adapt for the examination period and offer other services online. In terms of exams, there was a general attempt to change curricula, where possible, in order to avoid in-person exams while fulfiling module requirements through project-based course works and essays. Meanwhile, for modules that could not be assessed through coursework, exams were held.

Figure 3. Reopening phases for Universities in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia vis-à-vis number of daily infection.

Source: Authors, based on WHO data

In Tirana, a mixed approach was applied and some universities postponed exams. In September, a third semester was added by some universities as an additional opportunity for students to hold more consultations with their professors. Meanwhile, exams were conducted in a hybrid fashion, combining in-person exams with online ones depending on class size, facilities to conduct exams, and the typology of the subject. For in-class exams, universities applied a partial re-opening under strict rules of distancing. In Pristina, exams were conducted in person. Students were required to wear facemasks and gloves throughout the entire exam period. Additionally, students were checked at the entrance for fever and asked whether they had any COVID-19 symptoms. Meanwhile, in Northern Macedonia, although there was a general attempt to open the sector and conduct in-person exams, the increase in the number of registered COVID-19 patients in June obliged universities to rethink their position and shift all exams online.

It is important to highlight that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic none of the universities had established procedures for online submissions or examination. This fact helps explain their quick response in

the current situation. All of the universities have online systems where students can view their timetable, grades, and conduct other administrative functions. However, this situation has created the pre-conditions for universities to quickly grow their online services.

Universities in all three countries have extended their online presence and activities. There is a general tendency for online webinars, talks, and digital conferences during this period. Additionally, there are some efforts to establish online help-lines in order to support students with queries. At the same time, however, these efforts have yet to fully address issues such as inclusivity and equity due to the scarcity of resources, geographical location, limited infrastructure, and inadequate availability of online learning content.

In Albania, the new academic year was expected to begin on November 2, 2020, for public universities, while other private universities had begun the academic year earlier. The universities were expected to start their academic year in hybrid mode. It was left to the discretion of academic institutions to decide on the combination of in-class and online activities. However,

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Figure 4. University activities during COVID-19

Country	Online Classes	Online Exams	Online PhD	Exams with Strict Procedures	Online Library
Albania	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Kosovo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
North Macedonia	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗

Source: Authors, based on data from university websites.

on October 29, 2020, with the number of infections increasing, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs announced that universities would conduct all of their activities online for a period of one month to evaluate the evolution of the situation.

In Kosovo, the rectors of seven public universities decided that the new academic year 2020/2021 would begin in October. In Kosovo, universities are operating in a hybrid mode. Classes have been moved online, while laboratory-based activities are being conducted in-person, with restricted numbers and in smaller groups. Meanwhile, in North Macedonia, the new academic year 2020/2021 will start with online lessons and no in-class activities.

Switching to online education brought along some challenges, such as: quality assurance of lecturing and exams; limited number and access to free online libraries; the absence of practical and lab work; the impossibility to fulfil tasks that require field work; proactive engagement of students in self-taught learning processes, which require strong free will and responsible behaviour; and effective online classroom management. These challenges could not be fully addressed in the short-term and require innovative thinking towards new ways and methods of teaching and learning. However, innovation takes time and systemic challenges such as a procedural or methodological obstacles, infrastructural aspects, inclusive access, and staff capacity will continue to affect any long-term strategy.

COVID-19 and Socio-cultural Services

Along with universities, social and cultural services such as museums, art galleries, and libraries are among the most affected by this crisis. The sudden closure and lack of online access caused an absence of services for citizens and a loss of revenues for institutions.

Libraries are an essential institution for students and the general public. In all three countries, all national libraries were closed and remain closed so for in-venue use due to the increased number of COVID-19 cases. In Kosovo, the National Library switched its services for the application for ISSN/ISBN online[8]. These services were conducted through email communication. Meanwhile, the library offers a number of online resources, primarily through links to other institutions such as the OECD library, IMF, Albano-logic Portal, as well as resources from Edward and Elgar Publishing (National Kosovo Library, 2020). The Albano-logic Portal is offered in collaboration with the Albanian National Library in Tirana. Similarly to the Kosovo National Library, the Albanian National Library offers a limited number of services online, namely an online cataloguing service for finding books or other publications. Nevertheless, the number of online, accessible publications is very limited. Another service that has shifted online is the handling of requests for registering in the national library system.[9] The St. Kliment Ohridski National and University Library in North Macedonia was also closed during the COVID-19 period. However, it is difficult to assess the operation

of the library during the pandemic as there is no official (functional) website. Hence, in the absence of a working website and content on its social media page, it can be assumed that the services offered by the national library were limited. In all three countries, the COVID-19 pandemic found these key national institutions unprepared and facing remarkable challenges to shift their services online. After the isolation period, in all three countries, the national libraries reinitiated the lending of books without allowing the use of their facilities.

National museums and national art galleries also experience the COVID-19 crisis as a risk to their sustainability. In Albania, the National Historic Museum and the National Art Gallery were closed with the outbreak of the pandemic in the country. Both institutions are public and are usually funded from the government budget and through entrance fees. The National Historic Museum and the National Art Gallery had an online 3-D tour service prior to the pandemic, which was developed through a European Project (Ministry of Culture of Albania, 2020a; 2020b). Hence, during the pandemic, this service was promoted further. Additionally, the National Historic Museum launched a series of online campaigns between March and April 2020, i.e. short informative tours of the museum focused on different themes and children's activities such as "build your own mosaic," as well as some online webinars (National Historic Museum of Albania, 2020). Similarly, the National Art Gallery promoted the existing, online 3-D tour service[10] through social media (mainly Facebook). However, unlike the National Historic Museum (which attempted to develop some dedicated campaigns during COVID-19), the National Art Gallery did not develop any. The gallery did increase its presence on social media, though most of the posts were YouTube videos developed by other artists. Thus, it contributed to sharing certain debates or discussions in the art sector, not tailored to the context. After the spring isolation period, the national Gallery reopened under strict rules and protocols and allowing only a limited number of visitors at a time.

Nevertheless, the closure of the museum, as well as the low number of foreign tourists in Albania, may pose a challenge in terms of the institution's finances.

The National Museum of Kosovo was closed during the pandemic between March and June 2020. The museum does not have an official (functional) webpage. This makes it difficult to assess the online services that were offered to the general public. The only online channel of communication with the public during the pandemic was the official social media page (National Museum of Kosovo, 2020). Compared to the National Museum of Albania, the museum in Kosovo did not offer any virtual, 3-D tour platforms. Nevertheless, the museum offered a series of videos regarding different exhibitions in the museum on its Facebook page during the pandemic. A similar approach was also taken by the National Art Gallery in Kosovo. The Facebook page was its main communication channel with the general public during the COVID-19 lockdown (National Art Gallery of Kosova, 2020). A series of virtual, 3-D tours were organized on specific exhibitions such as "Onufri Remade" and "Home+" by Muslim Mulliqi. Both of these exhibitions were developed last year, in 2019, and afterwards were published as 3-D tours during the pandemic lockdown. Additionally, the National Art Gallery posted different paintings on its Facebook page to promote the work of different artists. Although the official website of the gallery was functional, no services were offered online through this medium.
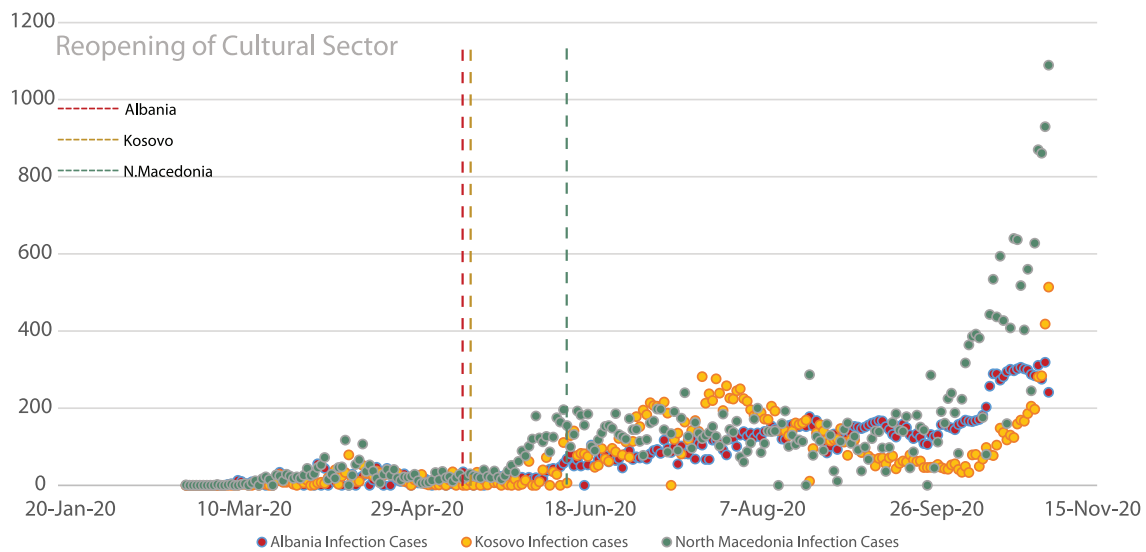
The National Museum of North Macedonia was also closed amid the pandemic. Looking at the official website, no online services were provided between March and May 2020 (National Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020; National Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020b). Its official social media channels were not updated and were not utilized from February onward. Like the National Museum, the National Art Gallery did not offer any online services through its website or social media accounts (National Art Gallery of the Republic of North Macedonia,

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2020; National Art Gallery of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020b).

The above situation is characterised by the challenges of weak or absent online systems, a lack of other alternatives to providing services, and inadequate infrastructures to do so. As art galleries and libraries are usually enjoyed and used through physical presence, the transition (or the absence

in some cases) of these services to online modes requires different alternatives to access art and culture. In all three countries, the reopening phase for the cultural sector took place between May and June 2020 with restrictive measures to respect social distancing. This sector is facing a "new normal" without a proper plan if another lock-down occurs.

Figure 5. Reopening phases in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia vis-à-vis number of daily infections

Source: Authors, based on WHO data

Currently, all cultural activities are being reopened under strict rules. There are a limited number of people who can take part in these activities and a limited number of visitors that can enter the institutions at once.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has offered a preliminary overview of the current situation in three WB countries – Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia – in terms of the pandemic's effects on key socio-cultural and academic institutions. The investigation was based primarily on official documents, websites, and the social media profiles of the respective institutions in each country. The current COVID-19 figures in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia show upward trends, putting the health sector to test and raising

several uncertainties regarding the future. Education and socio-cultural institutions are also significantly impacted by the pandemic and will continue to be impacted depending on how the situation evolves.

With the new academic year commencing in November 2020, the approaches across the three countries vary from hybrid learning in Kosovo, to full online learning in North Macedonia, and a mixture of hybrid and fully online learning in Albania (depending on the institution). So far, general rules and protocols have been prepared by the respective ministries in each country. Nevertheless, the code of conduct is at the discretion of each university. Compared to socio-cultural sector activities, the academic sector was quick to shift its teaching activities online. Although this is not the best option for academic subjects that are

lab-based, several subject areas have been transferred online. There are no current, structured studies to assess the successes and acceptance of online teaching and learning from staff and students. Universities have adopted mixed approaches to conduct examinations. In some cases, there have been in-person exams while in others, exams have been conducted online. These new exam procedures have affected end of year exams for bachelor and master students, as well as PhD defences. One of the main pitfalls of the university sector in all three countries, however, is the low level of electronic library resources offered. This is a hindrance for research and compromises access to high quality, reliable, and trustworthy resources for students.

This lack of electronic university resources is exacerbated by the lack of services offered by the national libraries of each country. The information on their respective websites was quite limited, while the number of electronic volumes available is very low. As a result, students and citizens who wish to access books, archives, or other types of publications cannot do so unless the institutions housing them are open.

The national galleries and museums have been slow to react to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only in the case of Albania, due to a prior project, were virtual, 3-D tours offered for the national museum and the national art gallery. Meanwhile in Kosovo, only two exhibitions from last year were offered through a virtual, 3-D tour service. In North Macedonia, no services were offered online.

This demonstrates that the sector was highly unprepared to respond to a pandemic and their services will continue to be under pressure in case of a future lockdown. The current conditions are a challenge not only in terms of the services these type of institution offer but also regarding their income. National museums and art galleries are dependent on entrance fees for part of their income; hence we can expect their budgets to be severely lower in the near future.

Based on these preliminary findings, a series of recommendations can be put forward:

- It is important to conduct a thorough and complete analysis on the impact of the pandemic in the higher education sector. Such an analysis could be survey-based and focus on the academic and research process, and on students and staff adaptation. This is extremely important in order to understand current dynamics as well as offer adequate policy options considering the uncertainties of the future

- Universities need to work towards digitalizing their libraries and offering tailored access solutions to their students. This is not a short-term consideration but rather a detailed program of digitalization and access to online resources should be developed. The extent of digitalization and online services should be carefully assessed regarding long-term implications, and should not be seen as a substitute for the current, traditional, or conventional practices but as complementary. Hence, the question in this case should not be how to switch to online services, but rather how online services can add value to existing practices.

- Universities have a great opportunity with the upcoming ERASMUS +, Horizon Europe, and other funding schemes to make great leaps forward with regard to technology and online resources. This poses a particularly great opportunity following the new EU Green Deal, where economic recovery from COVID-19 is envisaged to be coupled with actions on climate change and the environment.

- National Libraries, need to upgrade their services. This is evident in all three countries. They need to develop a digitalization plan or programme. Libraries too can be an active part of EU funding schemes or other donor programs.

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- National Museums, especially in North Macedonia and Kosovo, need to invest more in terms of online, 3-D tours. Such tours are a great service for reaching younger generations as well as promoting their respective countries to foreigners. The digitalization agenda should also take in consideration services that can be offered through payment.

- In the long-term, the education and socio-cultural sectors should increase their attention towards Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). These policies need to be mainstreamed in these sectors, especially when considering that the future challenges in terms of climate change will require further adaptation.

These are only a few short-term recommendations that come as a result of this preliminary study. From a research perspective, it is important to assess the impact of the pandemic in both sectors addressed in this paper. An important aspect for all institutions is the mainstreaming of DRR policies in their activities. These practices are limited in the WB context, as most institutions only focus on a response in the case of an emergency. Usually, these practices focus on evacuation protocols, but are not expanded to contingency planning in cases of lockdowns. None of the institutions discussed here had a disaster risk reduction plan – only emergency plans related to evacuations. Hence, disaster risk reduction plans need to be streamlined in all sectors, including education and the socio-cultural. This pandemic offers an opportunity for WB countries to start acting with smart and resilient measures and enhance the above-mentioned sectors from a technological point of view. Lastly, it is important to shift the attention of political discourses towards these sectors, especially at the national level. The current pandemic and health crises will soon be followed by economic and social crises. The education and socio-cultural sectors will need to rethink their roles and approaches in overcoming these challenges in order to prepare future and resilient societies. To conclude, the sustainability of systems requires an integrated approach where social aspects, which also include education and cultural formation, constitute a factor of outmost importance.

Notes

1. Figures are based on World Health Organization data retrieved on November 15, 2020.

2. https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/al; https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/xk; https://covid19.who.int/region/country/mk.

3. Decree, No. 243, dated 24.3.2020.

4. Decree, No. 91, dated 9.3.2020

5. Decree no. 01/08, dated 12.3.2020.

6. Decree no. 01/07, dated 11.3.2020.

7. Universities taken into consideration were: Polis University and Polytechnic University in Albania; the American University of Kosovo and University of Prishtina in Kosovo; and "Mother Teresa" University and Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in North Macedonia.

8. https://www.biblioteka-ks.org/.

9. https://www.bksh.al/.

10. https://my.matterport.com/ show/?m= QTqXxVmDWSR.

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