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ARTICLE



Pandemic cultural policy. A comparative perspective on Covid-19 measures and their effect on cultural policies in Europe

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ABSTRACT

To what extent did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the tools, priorities and organisation of cultural policies? And did the pandemic enhance the digital aspect of these policies? This paper compares pandemic cultural policy measures in seven European countries to answer these questions. The countries all installed a plurality of mitigating measures, combining grants and subsidies, compensation of lost income, income support and financial flexibility, creating a tendency towards cultural policy turning into economic policy, fiscal policy, and labour market policy. Cultural policies have not been fundamentally challenged by the pandemic, in the sense that it has affected the essential political tools, divisions of labour, or core goals. The responses have confirmed an existing policy structure or enhanced existing developments. The importance of a state-centred or a federalist cultural policy system has not been challenged in a substantial way. Secondly there is little evidence to show a general acceleration of national digital cultural policies.

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Introduction

From early March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a very basic question in most corners of society: what will change now? The question of change and, equally, of the nature, scope and duration of change, has been and still is a topic for lengthy discussions. The cultural sector and cultural policy are no exception. It has become a prevalent hypothesis among academics, analysts, and commenters alike that the current pandemic is causing structural changes in the cultural sector, or that it is accelerating developments within the sector. Examples include analyses of increased online presence of cultural institutions, an increase in digital performances (Agostino, Arnaboldi, and Lampis 2020; Hylland 2022), increased platformisation (Vlassis 2021), a revision of cultural value (Meyrick and Barnett 2021) and exposed precarity for cultural workers (Banks 2020; Comunian and England 2020; OECD 2020a; Pacella, Luckman, and O'Connor 2021; Primorac 2021a), as well as of more general challenges for the cultural industries (Salvador, Navarrete, and Srakar 2021; de Peuter, Oakley, and Trusolino 2022).

It is a pertinent question whether or to what extent the pandemic also has affected the tools, priorities and organisation of cultural policy. That is the topic of this paper. At the time of writing, there are only a handful of available studies of the relations between Covid-19 and cultural policy (Betzler et al. 2020; Banks and O'Connor 2021; KEA European Affairs 2020; Berge, Storm, and Hylland 2021; Amann and Heinsius 2021; Nordic Council of Ministers 2021; OECD 2020b; Vlassis 2021; Walmsley et al. 2022). The majority of these studies are commissioned reports on the scope and success of different cultural policy measures to minimise the negative impact of Covid-19 on the cultural sector. The studies discuss the short- and long-term effect on cultural policy to a far lesser extent. A notable exception is the comparative analysis of Betzler et al. (2020), who underline the importance of *contextual* factors to understand the cultural policy measures of different countries and their potential consequences.¹

The pandemic situation represented a sudden challenge for cultural policy in general, in terms of priorities and practical implementation. Furthermore, as we will argue, the issue of a *digital* cultural policy became highly relevant, more or less overnight. In this paper, we look at adaptations and policy measures implemented in seven different European countries, all included in a comparative research project² on the digital turn of cultural production and cultural policies: Croatia, the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. These countries represent to some extent a cross-section of European nation states, as they differ, e.g. in population and size, in their constitutional and political organisation, and in their relation to the EU.³ They also represent both Northern, Western, Eastern and Southern Europe, according to established divisions of European regions.

The Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to both revisit some fundamental questions for comparative cultural policy analysis as well as to ask new ones. This study takes the interaction between long-term processes and the sudden shock of the pandemic under the lens. We ask in particular whether the different adaptations to Covid-19 confirm, reinforce, or challenge existing cultural policy priorities and divisions of labour in different European countries. As well as to what extent the implemented measures represent an acceleration of a *digital* cultural policy in the respective countries.

A hypothesis for this analysis is that a process of convergence of cultural policy models or systems accelerates in reaction to exogenous drivers. In this case, Covid-19 and digital transformation represent two different but possibly combined external drivers of change for the cultural policy system. From the experience of the financial crisis of 2008–2009, we know, however, that it is notoriously difficult to evaluate the lasting effects of an ongoing crisis. For instance, when the consequences of the financial crisis for the cultural sector were analysed by Bonet and Donato in 2011, they envisaged a much more fundamental change taking place than what arguably happened. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see a hypothesis like the following as overestimating the level of change: '[I]t is predictable that the degree of public contributions might significantly decrease in the next years, due to the deepening of the crisis and its impact on public budgets'. And, furthermore, that 'in most European countries, culture is struggling to keep its position in the welfare state' (Turbide et al. 2008; Bonet and Donato 2011; 7, cf; Badia, Borin, and Donato 2015). Numbers from Eurostat show, however, that governmental expenditure on 'recreation, culture and religion' in the EU-27 countries has returned to a similar level as before the financial crisis. Both in 2006 and in 2019 this category represented 2.5% of the total expenditure.⁴ With the caveat that pessimistic predictions may have triggered stakeholders and policy makers to adopt timely and effective countermeasures, the apparent problem invoked by Bonet and Donato has not yet come true.

In the following, we discuss the analytical vantage point for the article, including the methodology and data of the analysis. This is followed by a short presentation of the cultural policy division of labour in our seven case countries, both in general cultural policy and in more particular digital cultural policies. After a systematic review of the Covid-19-related measures in the different countries, we discuss the main questions asked by the article. In the final section, we present some implications and possible perspectives for upcoming research on the relation between Covid-19 and cultural policy.

On comparative analysis of cultural policy and cultural policy changes

Previous comparative cultural policy analyses have concluded that statistics and quantitative indicators yield by themselves partial and patchy results. As underlined by both Belfiore (2004) and Betzler et al. (2020), a certain focus on context and qualitative approaches is necessary: 'a quantitative approach cannot alone suffice to understand the workings of the cultural sector and of policies for it across nations' (Belfiore 2004, 15; also Wiesand 2002).

There are some common aspects featured in most categorisations of national cultural policy. A central dimension is the role and importance of the state relative to the commercial and private sphere, and, often accordingly, to what degree the cultural policy is characterised by a free market logic. There are several attempts within cultural policy research to establish taxonomies of cultural policy models in this respect, enabling researchers to compare different national and regional versions of supporting arts and culture (e.g. Cummings and Katz 1987; Chartrand and McCaughey 1989; Zimmer and Toepler 1996; Madden 2009; Rius-Ulldemolins, Pizzi, and Rubio Arostegui 2019).

An alternative for comparing the general cultural policy models of different countries is put forward by Stefan Toepler and Anette Zimmer (Zimmer and Toepler 1996; 1999; Toepler and Zimmer 2002). They investigate relations between different types of welfare states (e.g. liberal, conservative, social-democratic) and the public arts or cultural policies. For instance, Zimmer and Toepler (1996) compare the cultural policy models of Germany, the United States, and Sweden. They observe that, on one level, the cultural policies of the three countries share more similarities than differences, even though they represent three different welfare state systems. In all three countries, public cultural policy emerged within a social-democratic paradigm, through 'building cultural capital by increasing access to the arts' (Zimmer and Toepler 1996, 188). However, by looking at the more specific tools of cultural policy, more regime-specific differences emerge. Furthermore, the general expansion of cultural policy in the 1970s, taking place in a number of countries, is legitimated differently in the three case countries: 'correction of market failure in the United States, income and employment guarantees in Sweden, and reduction of status differentiation between high and community culture in Germany' (Zimmer and Toepler 1996, 188).

Zimmer and Toepler (1996) conclude that different legitimations of cultural policy models might face substantial challenges and/or changes. They predict that the three welfare state models are *converging*; as well as that the liberal model is gaining ground at the expense of the social-democratic doctrine. Furthermore, this process might even culminate in the end of unique and extensive statutory cultural policy proper, as we enter 'the post-cultural policy age' (Zimmer and Toepler 1996, 199; Mangset 2020).

A more recent converging hypothesis has been put forward by Rius-Ulldemolins, Pizzi, and Rubio Arostegui (2019). They hypothesise that (European) cultural policy models converge, and even raise the question of whether it still makes sense to speak of different cultural policies within Europe. The authors document convergence in the aims underpinning cultural policy around explicit and similar social, regional, and economic goals being added to cultural policy throughout Europe (Rius-Ulldemolins, Pizzi, and Rubio Arostegui 2019, 16). However, they find no compelling evidence that the more fundamental models of cultural policy would be converging.

The concept of convergence is closely related to the concept of *isomorphism*. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have argued that, with social and economic development comes a trend towards ever more similar organisations and organising principles. According to the authors, this development is not just the result of a rational movement towards ever more efficient ways of organising different kinds of practice (mimetic isomorphism), but also comes about through two other mechanisms: coercive isomorphism due to external pressures (including laws and government regulation) and normative isomorphism, due to shared norms and values in societies, for instance of professionalism. According to Alasuutari and Kangas (2020), this isomorphism is apparent in the development of governmental conduct, including cultural policy. They point to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a central agent in promoting a specific, shared

conceptualisation of cultural policy. Another possible force of convergence and/or isomorphism in European cultural policy is the EU, as a powerful legal entrepreneur and policy coordinator (Sassatelli 2002, 2007, 2009; Bradford 2020; Amann and Heinsius 2021). In general, there seem to be three major potential agents for transformations (including isomorphism) of national cultural policy: 1) international, regional, and inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), such as UNESCO or the EU; 2) external shocks that destabilise entrenched institutions, traditions, and routines, such as the Covid-19 pandemic; and 3) technological change, including digitisation.

The Corona pandemic provides thus a test as to whether alleged, long-standing trends in cultural policy still hold. The pandemic brings about an apparent urgent need for new policy initiatives, at least to tie things over a temporary crisis situation. Cultural policy makers are virtually required to improvise, innovate, and go beyond traded routines. In 'normal times', extant (cultural) policy will often be preserved by appreciation of stability and reliability, the costs of change, as well as entrenched interests of influential stakeholders. During the pandemic, some of this scaffolding is falling away. Policy makers' recent actions are thus likely to reveal with greater clarity what underlying assumptions and values guide current cultural policy.

Methodology and data

There are several potential parameters and categories for comparing Covid-19 measures. One possibility is to look at the basic policy nature of the implemented measures: Are the measures in question legislative and regulatory, administrative, informative, or fiscal (cf. Lowi 1972)? On a more practical level, a relevant parameter for comparison would be the way the different measures are operationalised: Are they production subsidies and grants, loans, tax reliefs or reductions, or mere administrative leniency? In other words: Are the measures best understood as labour market policy or as cultural policy? This article's enquiries address these questions based on official policy documents from the first 18 months of the pandemic. For each country, a policy mapping in three stages was done. The first stage, in May and June 2020, consisted of a country-specific mapping and categorising of 1) policy measures and initiatives specifically targeting the cultural sector, 2) general measures and initiatives that included and affected the cultural sector, and 3) publicly sanctioned new platforms for digital production and/or distribution of culture. The sources for this mapping exercise were the webpages, news releases and strategies published by different national entities and ministries in charge of cultural policies in the respective countries.⁵ Although there were differences in the availability and the transparency of information from different governments, we are confident that we have covered the essential mitigating policies in all seven countries. This first-stage mapping also included a general mapping of cultural policy principles in these countries, including the division of labour and funding between levels of government, the relation to the EU, digital cultural policy initiatives and the relation between public and private funding of culture.⁶

The second stage of mapping took place in November 2020, when the abovementioned categories of policy measures were updated and revised. In addition to specific and general measures, a category of *regional* cultural policy Covid-19 measures was also added to the overview. The third stage of policy mapping was conducted in November 2021. This was an analytical mapping, where country-focused analyses were written by the individual authors of this paper. These contained tentative answers to whether and to what extent the pandemic had affected 1) the general cultural policy model/structure of the individual countries, 2) the relative importance of different sources of funding, 3) the division of labour between different levels of government, and 4) the importance of digital cultural policies as part of general cultural policy. These analyses form an important part of the basis for the discussion of the article.

Furthermore, we also selected four early studies of cultural policy related to Covid-19, some of which cover various countries (KEA European Affairs 2020; OECD 2020a; Amann and Heinsius 2021; Nordic Council of Ministers 2021). We use this qualitative data to work out categories and a systematic overview of types of Covid-19 measures directed to the cultural sector. To answer the

questions asked in this article, we draw on established categories of national cultural policy models and have sought to develop related categories of various measures aimed at mitigating adverse consequences of the Covid-19 crisis in the seven countries concerned.

Cultural policy and division of responsibility in seven case countries

Comparative cultural policy analyses have tended to use different ideal-types to describe the basic features of cultural policy in different countries. Norway and Sweden have been labelled as belonging to a Nordic or a Social-Democratic model, Germany as representing a Central-Western European or Conservative model, Croatia as a South-Eastern, Switzerland as a Central-Western and Spain as a South-Western European model (cf. Zimmer and Toepler 1996; Duelund 2003; Rius-Ulldemolins, Pizzi, and Rubio Arostegui 2019). Partly using geographical, partly ideological or political descriptions, none of the existing attempts captures the relevant differences and characteristics in a satisfactory manner. This includes, for instance, the existing divisions of labour between different levels of government.

What are the comparative characteristics of the cultural policy of our seven case countries? Based on the mapping of cultural policies in our case countries, a set of basic traits of the cultural policy profile of the seven countries was identified and is summarised in Table 1. These include relations with the EU, the level of regional authority (as measured by the Regional Authority Index)⁷, the division of cultural spending between levels of government, the division of labour and responsibility, the importance of private funding, as well as basic cultural policy values and traits from *digital* cultural policies.

What our case countries have largely in common is that there is a general division of labour between two, three or four levels of government. The individual responsibility of these levels varies greatly, however, as does the division of cultural spending (cf. Table 1). Germany and Switzerland are federal states, where a large part of the responsibility for culture is placed at the regional level – in the *Länder* (Germany) or in the cantons (Switzerland) (cf. Wesner 2010; Marx 2020). At the same time, there are also state or confederate cultural policy actors in these two countries, like the Federal Office of Culture and Arts Council *Pro Helvetia* in Switzerland or the German quasi-ministerial post *Staatsminister(in)/Beauftragte für Kultur und Medien*.

Spain is a quasi-federal country. The structure of competences and responsibilities of cultural administrations (national, regional, and local, with two levels: provincial administrations and city councils) gives a predominant role to the regional level, which has an exceptionally high degree of autonomy, as shown by the country's Regional Authority Index (RAI) (cf. Table 1). But this role varies greatly depending on the size of the cultural sector located in the region, the historical link of this sector with the central administration and the level of political legitimacy of the regional culture. The central cultural administration deals mostly with regulatory and infrastructural aspects of cultural activity, but not only: the combination of the above factors also determines its very disparate presence and direct action in different regions – from a leading role in Madrid, where it is responsible for the most important cultural institutions, to an almost residual presence in the Basque Country or in Catalonia (cf. Rius-Ulldemolins and Zamorano 2015).

In the Scandinavian countries of Sweden and Norway, the cultural policy is characterised by a strong state and by policy development on a national level. But, in both countries, there is also a sizeable financial responsibility placed on the regional and especially the municipal levels (cf. Frenander 2014; Mangset and Hylland 2018). Furthermore, both countries have also recently implemented reforms giving the regional and municipal levels of government a larger cultural policy responsibility. These reforms are the source of numerous debates on what is gained and what is lost by shifting cultural policy responsibility from one level to another (cf. Renko et al. 2022).

In the case of the UK, there is also a division of labour and responsibility between different levels of government, complicated by the fact that the UK is comprised of four separate countries – so-called *devolved nations* – granted a certain level of autonomy (cf. Bell and Oakley 2014). In general,



Table 1. Comparison across selected country-specific and cultural policy-specific features.

Country	Relation to the EU	Regional Authority Index	Division of cultural spending, central government		Division of labour/responsibility	Private funding	Cultural policy values	Digital cultural policy
			/region/municipality, ⁸ Percentages (local) (2020)	/38,6 (regional)/38,6 (local) (2020)				
Croatia	Recent member	9,55	40,9 (state)/20,4(regional)/38,6 (local) (2020)	State , county, city	Limited importance.	Cultural pluralism, creative autonomy, polycentric cultural development, cultural participation and public/private cooperation	Limited funding; Fragmented bottom-up approach; Low visibility of digital content. Plan for Digitisation of Cultural Heritage (2020–2025) shifts emphasis on more centralistic approach.	
Germany	Original member	25,67	17/39/45 (2017)	State, region , municipality	Limited importance. Public-private partnership increasing.	Decentralisation, subsidiarity, and plurality, freedom of the arts, some emphasis on 'high arts' and scepticism of commercial culture	Emphasis on private initiatives. Arts and culture play a minor role in government strategies on digitisation.	
Norway	Non-member	11,99	46/6/48	State , region, municipality	Of relatively little importance, albeit increasing.	Welfare, democratisation of arts and culture, quality and diversity.	Digitisation of cultural heritage central.	
Spain	Member	35,67	17/27/58	State, region , provincial, local	Of relatively little importance	Heritage preservation, plurality of cultural identities, democratisation of the arts, cultural participation, economic promotion	Digitisation of cultural heritage, digitisation of the cultural sector management.	
Sweden	Member	12,00	43/15/42	State , region, municipality	Of relatively little importance, albeit increasing.	Three objectives: the independence objective, the participation objective and the societal objective.	Emphasis on accessibility, preservation, distribution and digitisation (making the analogue digitally accessible).	
Switzerland	Non-member	26,50	11/38/51	State, region , municipality	Private funding important and critical. Public-private partnerships.	Representation of the different languages and regions; cultural diversity.	Digitisation of culture recently formulated as a key objective.	
UK	Previous member	9,59 (18,5–20,5)	32/-/68 ⁹	State, country , region, municipality	Important in some sectors, amount of public funding diminishing	Economic growth of the cultural sectors, excellence, diversity and soft-power	Increasing stress on digitisation of heritage. Digital policy also focusses on regulation/harm reduction.	

Sources: Authors' own mapping and policy analyses, Eurostat, Compendium.

there is some funding available at the UK level, administered by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Otherwise, cultural policy is a 'devolved matter'¹⁰, in the sense that the individual countries of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland develop individual cultural policies and associated funding schemes.

Regarding Croatia, its cultural policy can to some extent be described as *implicit* policy, as the official strategies for most areas are lacking and no systemic reform of the cultural system has been undertaken in the last 30 years. According to some analysts, Croatian cultural policy is (still) characterised by a combination of continuity and discontinuity with the former socialist system of the country. This is, for example, visible in the fact that large parts of the existing cultural infrastructure are part of the legacy of this system (Primorac, Obuljen Koržinek, and Uzelac 2017). The responsibility for funding arts and culture is primarily placed at the national level and at the level of towns and cities (with the city of Zagreb alone representing 22% of the total expenditure), while municipalities and countries combined represent 8% of the funding (Primorac, Obuljen Koržinek, and Uzelac 2017).

Looking more specifically at *digital cultural policy*, the question of comparison becomes even more challenging, partly because of the blurred boundaries between the explicit and implicit parts of this policy. Due to the fundamental and pervasive technological nature of digital production, distribution and consumption, choices and decisions made in policy areas like broadband infrastructure, tax regulations, broadcasting licences and competition law have direct consequences for the production and distribution of digital cultural content. We can think of this as the *implicit* side of digital cultural policy. In addition to this, the *explicit* side of digital cultural policy consists of the strategies and schemes for supporting the production and/or distribution of digital content – for example, through the digitisation of heritage, production of computer games or financing of distribution platforms. In other words, the policy area of digital culture, consists, broadly speaking, of a combination of infrastructure development and regulation and support mechanisms (cf. Hylland 2022).

The responsibility for digitisation in general and digital culture more specifically is placed in different public organs, ministries, and directorates in the seven countries in question. The organisation of responsibility partly follows the distinction between regulation and support. The case of the UK is an example of the distinction between regulation of online content on the one hand and support for digitisation on the other hand. In the UK, regulation is largely a matter for *Ofcom*, the communications regulator, which has had a lot of responsibility added to its portfolio in recent years – including online harms. The responsibility for digital infrastructure is placed at Building Digital UK (BDUK), part of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). This inclination towards seeing communication policy as mainly focused on infrastructure and economic development and cultural and media policies as more on content regulation is relatively common (Valtysson 2020, 57).

Summing up, the main differences between the seven countries are primarily concerning the level of regional authority and/or federalism and thereby the relative importance of the state level of government. Furthermore, the countries differ on the importance of private funding of arts and culture, and to some degree also on the legitimating values the cultural policies are based on, explicitly or implicitly. Regarding digital policies, it is a mixed picture. In general, all or most countries recognise that digitisation in some way is an integrated part of their cultural policies, but actual governmental involvement in digital projects is rather scattered, with an emphasis on digitisation of cultural heritage.

Covid-19 measures in the seven case countries

In mid-March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic became the dominating context for most aspects of both cultural production and cultural policy in all seven countries. It became evident that there was a need to launch *ad hoc* policy measures to improve the situation for the cultural and creative industries (CCI) sector. The situation for the part of CCI that was based, in some way or another, on a physical

audience, was most immediately affected. This included concert arenas, clubs and stages, theatres, museums, galleries, festivals, etc. Furthermore, parts of the cultural sector also suffered a loss in revenue because of the challenging economy of their patrons and clients, who became less interested in spending money on culture or on advertising (OECD 2020b).

Categories and implementation of measures

During the pandemic, international organisations have attempted to summarise the state of the art in the CCI/CCS¹¹ and the different measures to tackle the crisis. The OECD report *Cultural Shock* systemises various public tools to manage the crisis (OECD 2020a), distinguishing between four main categories of support: 1) public funding; 2) employment support; 3) deferral of payments and easing administrative procedures; and 4) structural policies. Under these main categories, a number of sub-categories of support are described, as shown in Table 2.

In general, our mapping shows that all countries in our study installed mitigating measures in most of the OECD categories of public funding, employment support and deferral of payments/easing administrative procedures in the first months after the pandemic hit Europe.¹² All countries used a plurality of measures, combining grants and subsidies, compensation of lost income, income support and financial flexibility or leniency. By necessity, these were mostly results of political *ad hoc* decisions. Several large-scale funds were established, such as the *Culture Recovery Fund* in the UK, and the *Neustart Kultur* and the *Sonderfonds für Kulturveranstaltungen* in Germany. Measures belonging to *structural policies* (the fourth main category of the OECD report) have, relatively speaking, been less important, in terms of both the amount of dedicated funding and the political attention for this kind of mitigating efforts. The importance of structural policies has slightly increased in the latter part of the pandemic, including efforts to get knowledge on the impact for the cultural sector and on the effects of Covid-19 policies, as well as funding dedicated to developing innovation and digitisation-linked projects.

Overall, our mapping shows that there was a combination of general (e.g. for all small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs)), sector-specific (for cultural producers/CCI) and sub-sector-specific (for e.g. film production, music industry, or museums) measures being implemented. In the practical administration of the many different funds, programmes, grants and subsidies, a range of public sector entities have been involved. Seemingly, no *new* entities, departments or offices dedicated to Covid-19 policies have been established, although some existing entities have been assigned new tasks. In Germany, for instance, there has been an expansion of federal cultural funding. A more specific case in point is that the Norwegian Gambling and Foundation Authority was administering the most important compensation scheme for the cultural sector. Certain administrative changes have been implemented, including updated legislation and/or regulations in most

Table 2. Categories of Covid-19 support for CCI/CCS.

Public funding	Grants and subsidies for cultural sectors Grants and subsidies for individual artists Compensation of losses Loan provision and guarantee Investment incentives
Employment support	Job retention/income support Unemployment benefits
Deferral of payments and easing administrative procedures	Advanced aid Postponement of dues Relief of dues Procedural flexibility
Structural policies	Training and employment of creative workers Knowledge mobilisation and impact analysis Digitalisation Innovation Copyright licensing

Source: (OECD 2020a).

countries, to back up and secure a proper legislative foundation both for the implemented measures and for the shutdown of cultural activities. However, it is challenging to identify specific political or ideological principles across the wide range of measures for each country. Partly, this is rooted in the *ad hoc* and extraordinary nature of the first phase of Covid-19 cultural policies and the need for rapid implementation of support systems.

Covid-19 cultural policies

After almost two years of pandemic, we can nevertheless identify some characteristic traits of European cultural policies responding to the pandemic situation, both in general and regarding each country. Firstly, we see a tendency across all countries that cultural policy is taking the shape of economic policy, fiscal policy, and labour market policy. This has meant that ministries of finance or business in effect have come to represent important parts of national cultural policy during the pandemic. Although cultural policy in general concerns the allocation of funds for culture, it also bases such allocation on prioritisation, ideas of quality, policy goals and ambitions, etc. That has not been the case for Covid-19 cultural policies, as the focus has been directed towards mere business or industry survival, income loss compensation, salaries and liquidity. The UK government framing of the 1,57-billion-pound *Cultural Recovery Fund* is illustrative: 'to help save these sectors, maintaining jobs and keeping businesses afloat'.¹³ This has also highlighted the entrepreneurial and business side to cultural policies. This has been especially visible in countries like Norway and Sweden, where the perspective of culture as a profitable industry has been a less prevalent part of cultural policies. In the UK, however, where the value of the creative economy has been a core argument in the cultural policy discourse, this seems to have been downplayed in the administration of pandemic crisis funds. That said, it should be noted that the UK Cultural Recovery Fund tended to have greater uptake in places and with organisations that had a history of obtaining public cultural investment – and through this the funds did little to reverse existing inequalities in funding.

Another aspect being highlighted in all countries is the differences in distribution of risk between subsidised institutions and freelance artists (e.g. Primorac 2021b). While there are examples of subsidised cultural institutions making a profit of the combination of no production costs, layoffs and emergency support, thousands of self-employed artists lost all or most of their income (cf. Comunian and England 2020; Salvador, Navarrete, and Srakar 2021). This division could materialise through organisations restricting their activities to the *skeleton crew* (or the people with permanent contracts, who were too costly to let go), while still receiving extensive subsidies. This has brought attention to the general precarity of cultural labour and to the gap between the subsidised cultural sector and freelance cultural production (OECD 2020a; Berge, Storm, and Hylland 2021; Walmsley et al. 2022). In several countries, specific measures were put in place to counter the negative effects on revenue for freelance creative workers (e.g. the *Überbrückungshilfe*, a bridging allowance for self-employed in Germany, and making unemployment benefits for artists more available in Spain¹⁴).

Through the EU implementation in March 2020 of the *State Aid Temporary Framework*¹⁵, based upon specific exceptions under EU law, the possibility to support economies and enterprises in exceptional circumstances was expanded. This framework was pertaining to all seven countries, with the exception of Switzerland.¹⁶ Any kind of support needed to comply with some general rules, as described in the different versions of the framework. The measures needed to be 'necessary, appropriate and proportionate', in the words of the European Commission. All mitigating measures implemented by a non-member like Norway need, for example, to be approved by the EFTA Surveillance Authority (ESA), in order to check whether the support is in violation with the EEA Agreement and the European Internal Market. A question of whether the EU has contributed to a cultural policy *convergence* during the pandemic is thus challenging. On the one hand, the temporary framework gave individual

member states more flexibility in designing support measures according to national needs, with less emphasis on EU regulation and coordination. This would potentially represent cultural policy divergence more than convergence. On the other hand, the continued emphasis on keeping ‘the level playing field’ and the ‘cohesion within the Union’ is aiming to keep potential divergence in check, with the ESA approval routines as a case in point.

A pandemic challenge to cultural policies?

A central question is whether the cultural policies of individual countries has been fundamentally changed or challenged in any way by the pandemic, in the sense that it has affected the essential political tools, divisions of labour, or core legitimation and goals of these policies. We think that the general answer to that question is *no*. Likewise, there is very little evidence to support a convergence hypothesis – that European cultural policies are becoming more similar. In their 2019 article, Rius-Ulldemolins ‘Can we then still talk of different European cultural policy models?’ (Rius-Ulldemolins, Pizzi, and Rubio Arostegui 2019, 1045). To this question, they answer affirmative, as we also do in this article. Furthermore, Rius-Ulldemolins et al. also, by and large, refute their own convergence hypothesis of increasingly similar cultural policies, also in line with our results. A third comparative point is that they also document that the economic crisis in 2008–2009 did not lead to national cultural policies behaving *out of character*. On the contrary, the different national responses to the crisis, in terms of budget cuts, varied according to their respective cultural policy models (Rius-Ulldemolins, Pizzi, and Rubio Arostegui 2019, 1056; Rubio Arostegui and Rius-Ulldemolins 2020).

What the pandemic and the mitigating efforts have done, however, is to highlight and partially fortify existing cultural policy structures (cf. Berge, Storm, and Hylland 2021). All the seven countries in question show this kind of tendency. In Croatia, the policy measures reflect a previously set policy course, although the situation at times was overshadowed by two major earthquakes. Due to the fact that Croatia has a rather unequal regional and local development and hence big differences exist in local and regional budgets, cultural measures were mostly implemented at the national level. The crisis has thus not been used as an opportunity for policy change. The reaction on the local and regional level has been rather minimal even in areas that usually show high support for cultural field. In Germany, as well as in Switzerland, the pandemic cultural policies have been, as in most other countries, focusing upon temporary financial needs and a reduction of red-tape procedures to facilitate access to funds. There are very few measures that signal policy changes, such as for instance in fostering a more risk-resilient sector or in strengthening a digital cultural infrastructure.

In the Scandinavian countries of Norway and Sweden, the situation and the public discussion of measures highlighted the uneven distribution of risk between cultural producers. Some institutions profited from the situation, while many individual cultural producers and freelance artists suffered a great deal economically. The Nordic model of cultural policy represents a high level of public funding, an emphasis on the autonomy of the arts and a prominent role of artist organisations and unions (cf. Mangset et al. 2008). These traits were by and large affirmed and consolidated: both the importance of state funding, artistic autonomy, and a thoroughly organised cultural sector.

In Spain, the measures implemented varied, reflecting the heterogeneity of the different cultural policy contexts of the country. This includes the differences between levels of government, and the different political legitimacy of different public administrations (cf. Rius-Ulldemolins and Zamorano 2015). For example, as the Catalan cultural administration is imposed as a privileged reference to the Catalan cultural sector, while the Madrid cultural sector tends to be directly linked to the central administration, the mitigating actions of the different territorial administrations have varied, both in nature and volume. There are nevertheless tendencies towards some policy change, both regarding a slight shifting of powers between the tiers of government, and regarding the focus on the digital side of cultural policies.

The pandemic cultural policies of Switzerland also seemed to confirm the basic principles of Swiss cultural policy. While some have maintained that the Swiss Covid-19 response has been

characterised by a *consociational*¹⁷ crisis and by neo-corporatism (Sager and Mavrot 2020), this is not necessarily true for the cultural sector, where there was a great deal of solidarity shown and several new initiatives, both by public actors, such as the ProHelvetia Foundation and public service radio and broadcasting channels, as well as by bottom-up initiatives.

In the UK, the pandemic period could be seen as having deepened or intensified some trends that were already apparent. Among these are the increasing distinctions between policy in the four nations of the UK, the turn towards digital and the fading or mutating of the 'creative economy' discourse as a major driver of cultural policy. The sense of a fragmenting United Kingdom has been intensified during the period. Furthermore, the use of the recovery funding suggests that traditional arguments for support were just as important as creative economy arguments.

(Re)distribution of power between levels of government

Across the different countries, there are a couple of aspects that merit specific attention. As illustrated by the RAI index (cf. Table 1), a central distinguishing factor of different cultural policies, is the degree of regional (or local) autonomy. If we look specifically at this factor, we see that this parameter is helpful in understanding the cultural policy responses of the different countries. For most countries, the existing distribution of responsibility and power balance between governmental tiers has been confirmed through the pandemic policies. The importance of, respectively, a state-centred or a federalist cultural policy system, or a system of devolved nations in the case of the UK, has not been challenged in a substantial way. At the same time, there are small and potentially important shifts to be noted for some of the seven countries. In Spain, without altering the general distribution of power and thus preserving the high degree of territorial autonomy that characterises the Spanish system, cultural policies against Covid-19 have contributed, to some degree of cultural *recentralisation* of the country (cf. Rius-Ulldemolins, Rubio Arostegui, and Flor 2021). This is partly due to the importance of pandemic employment support from the central administration and partly to the importance of money from the European Recovery Fund, also administered by the central administration. Also, in the federalist states of Germany and Switzerland, the importance of the federal government in cultural policy have become more central during the pandemic, partly because the extraordinary nature of the crisis had shifted the regulatory authority to the federal level, e.g. through the implementation of the fund *Neustart Kultur*. And as mentioned, the importance of the state as a cultural policy actor has been thoroughly underlined and possibly strengthened in the Scandinavian countries. Being constituted by four individual nations, the UK is a case of its own, showing tendencies towards increasing distinctions between the four autonomous cultural policies of the country.

The potential power shifts are by no means unique to cultural policy. In a general report on managing the crisis across levels of government, the OECD observed differing governmental responses in terms of shifting responsibilities: 'some governments are temporarily recentralising while others are temporarily decentralising in order to manage the crisis' (OECD 2020b, 6). Even if our policy documentation does not show any considerable *decentralising* tendencies in the pandemic cultural policies, the OECD report directs attention to two relevant points for our topic: the potential temporality of the observed tendencies and the importance of *multi-level governance* during a crisis (cf. Hooghe and Marks 2001).

Digitisation and Covid-19

A second general topic across the pandemic cultural policies of the seven countries is the topic of digitisation and digital cultural policy. One of the working hypotheses for this analysis was that the Covid-19 situation was a potential accelerator for a digital turn in cultural policy – bringing digital culture, digital cultural consumption, and digital policies to the fore. The different lockdown phases of the pandemic, with digital distribution of culture as the only accessible option, should provide

fertile ground for such acceleration. In the OECD report on Covid-19 and the CCI/CCS, this kind of policy is labelled as structural change policies. While emphasising the importance of digitisation as a central part of such policies, the report documents surprisingly few initiatives in this regard (OECD 2020a). This is also confirmed by our analysis, thereby being an exception to the general analysis of another OECD report, pointing to accelerated digitalisation of services as an overall policy consequence of the pandemic (OECD 2020b). At the same time, there is little doubt that the first phase of the pandemic saw a very rapid increase in digital cultural offerings, such as for example through digital concerts (cf. Hylland 2021). Equally, the use of digital cultural media (streaming music, film, concerts, performances) and social media platforms rose substantially (e.g. Kshetri 2020).

In total, we find relatively few examples in our data indicating that the pandemic spurred a fundamental acceleration of a digital cultural policy in any of the seven countries included in the study. This differs, however, somewhat between them. While there was some political attention directed towards the importance of digitisation in countries like Norway, Sweden and Germany, there were hardly any new initiatives to foster digital infrastructure with direct government involvement. In Norway, for example, where very generous support measures were implemented, no funding was directed towards digitisation or digital culture. Likewise, there are few, if any, noticeable attempts in these countries to rethink the importance of digitisation as a part of cultural policies. In the UK, parts of the *Cultural Recovery Fund* were used to finance digitisation work and digital infrastructure. At the same time, the pandemic itself did not lead to the introduction of new digital policies for culture. These are underway as part of concerns about platform regulations and the growth of digital markets.¹⁸ The pandemic did seemingly not affect the ambitions or progress of this work. Furthermore, research carried out in the UK (Walmsley et al. 2022) suggested that, despite the relative importance of digital content in this phase of the pandemic, it was still only accessed by a minority of the population (43%) and largely by the same people who had accessed it before, i.e. the number of those happy to consume their culture digitally did not increase markedly.

In Switzerland, there is a recent and more explicitly spelled out emphasis on the digitisation of cultural policies. The current 4-year national cultural strategy, *Kulturbotschaft (2021–2024)*, which sets out the priorities for cultural measures at the federal level, stresses the digital side of culture based on a twofold approach: on the one hand, digital channels and platforms should facilitate access to culture; on the other hand, the development, production, and communication of digital art are to be promoted. At the same time, there are few visible signs of political attempts to relate this digital emphasis to the pandemic situation and the increase in digital cultural consumption during the pandemic, and indeed there is an ongoing discussion on reduction of funds for media outlets and the public service broadcaster and their engagement with online media. In contrast and as a proof that the policy environment is fluid and contentious, the Swiss Parliament adopted the so-called 'Netflix' law in September 2021, which will demand content platforms to devote a small part of their revenues for Swiss-made productions.¹⁹

For the last two countries, Croatia and Spain, the case is slightly different. Both members of the EU, these countries exemplify the potential impact and importance of EU funding within the cultural sector, also pertaining to digitisation. In Croatia, EU funding has previously been central to the development of digitisation strategies, including a current Plan for Digitisation of Cultural Heritage (2020–2025). During the pandemic, the Ministry of Culture and Media has launched public calls for developing digital cultural offerings, in part or in total financed by EU funds. In the recently published (post-pandemic) National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021–2026, there is also an acknowledgement of the importance of digitalisation for the CCI sector. In the case of Spain, the impact and influence of the EU membership became apparent in the later stages of the pandemic. Spain is one of the largest benefactors of the EU recovery package, Next Generation EU (NGEU). With digital transitions being one of the four general guiding principles of NGEU, Spain has emphasised digitisation heavily also in the cultural chapter of their recovery plan. Thus, both the pandemic and the EU funding have actually represented a certain acceleration of a digital cultural policy in Spain.

The vigorous development of these digitisation policies in the cultural sphere can be interpreted in this case as the result of the articulation between the window of opportunity offered by the European plan and the structural interests of the central administration in its implicit competition with the territorial administrations.

Concluding remarks

We think it is fair to say that the Covid-19 pandemic and the cultural policy measures accompanying it have *not* challenged the existing cultural policy structures of the countries investigated. This was not anticipated, and points to a substantial stability and resilience in the existing cultural policy models. Furthermore, the crisis has not led to any observable convergence of cultural policies, making the different national cultural policy models more similar than they were pre-Covid. These two points should be revisited in future research, to consider whether this apparent cultural policy inertia is a lasting quality and whether it will last in upcoming recessions.

Even if the nature of the cultural policy responses has a lot in common between the seven countries, the responses have in general either confirmed an existing policy structure or enhanced a development already happening within the individual countries. The importance of, respectively, a state-centred or a federalist cultural policy system, or for that matter, a system of devolved nations in the case of the UK, has not been challenged in a substantial way. Secondly, although the results are not univocal, there is little evidence to support the hypothesis that the pandemic cultural policies have represented a major acceleration of national digital cultural policies. With the exception of Spain, and possibly Croatia, the countries studied have not brought questions of digital culture and digital cultural consumption to the fore of their cultural policies. This is contrary to what was generally expected, especially in the first phase of the pandemic, when digital distribution of culture for a period became dominant. In other words, while cultural policy makers do not seem to have used the pandemic to accelerate digital policies, some of it will have been accelerated through people's use of digital offerings and the potential change in behaviour following from this.

The analysis and concluding points of this article must necessarily be read with some caution. At the time of writing, the pandemic is still not officially ended. Furthermore, the long-term effects of the pandemic, both in terms of the general conditions for cultural production and in terms of cultural policies, are not evident quite yet. In other words, our comparative analysis will potentially be affected by the fact that we are still, to some extent, mid-crisis. Our article was also finalised as European countries are experiencing new crises and challenges due to the war in Ukraine and the rising energy prices, just as the pandemic crisis seems to be less devastating. The potential financial effect this might have on cultural policies in Europe is far too early to say. Nevertheless, our study is clearly pointing towards results that will be highly relevant to follow up by further research in the years to come, including the resilience of cultural policies in times of crisis.

Notes

1. In this context, the authors stress for instance that 'it can be expected that in terms of cultural policy countries will react in ways that align with their priorities, differing between cultural and instrumental motives. As such, differences in cultural policy aims and justifications can be expected at country level (and overtime), whereby the national preferences in cultural policy (and funding) aims can be considered to reflect the broader preferences of nation-states' (Betzler et al. 2020, 2–3).
2. *Rapids and backwaters. Adapting fast and slow to a digital cultural turn*. Financed by Research Council Norway.
3. With Norway and Switzerland being non-members, Croatia being a rather recent member (since 2013), Germany an original member state, Spain being a member since 1986 and Sweden being a member since 1995, while the UK being now a former member.
4. See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_recreation,_culture_and_religion [Accessed 20.05.2021].
5. See the Annex for an overview of consulted webpages and selected documents.
6. See Table 1 for a summary of this mapping.

7. Regional Authority Index is a comprehensive dataset and a methodology that measures the authority and autonomy of government levels (cf. Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010; Schakel 2018).
8. See Compendium of cultural policies. The percentages are not from one and the same year but from data between 2013 and 2017 (cf. <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/statistics-comparisons/statistics/funding/#1563453131381-77d52055-b082>).
9. The percentages for division of cultural spending for the UK is calculated from the information in the national report from the UK in the *Compendium of cultural policies*. There are no numbers on regional expenditure in this overview. (cf. <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/database/search-by-country/country-profile/category/?id=42&g1=7>).
10. 'Devolved matters are those areas of government where decision-making has been delegated by Parliament to the devolved institutions such as the Scottish Parliament, the Assemblies of Wales, Northern Ireland and London or to Local Authorities'. <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/devolved-and-reserved-matters/> [Accessed 18.01.21].
11. Both acronyms (Cultural and Creative Industries/Cultural and Creative Sectors) are used in relevant reports.
12. For a detailed overview of different measures, see webpages included in the Annex.
13. <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/culture-recovery-board>.
14. See <https://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/actualidad/2020/05/200527-prestaciones-artistas-boe.html> [Accessed 20.09.22].
15. See https://ec.europa.eu/competition-policy/state-aid/coronavirus/temporary-framework_en [Accessed 11.02.22]. The importance of state aid control is at the same time emphasized in the temporary framework: 'Likewise, EU State aid control ensures that the EU Internal Market is not fragmented and that the level playing field stays intact. The integrity of the Internal Market will also lead to a faster recovery. It also avoids harmful subsidy races, where Member States with deeper pockets can outspend neighbours to the detriment of cohesion within the Union'.
16. The UK needed to comply with the framework during the transition period until December 31st, 2020.
17. Consociationalism is a political system whereby major internal divisions of a state are kept in check through stabilizing efforts by different elites. Cf. (Sager and Mavrot 2020).
18. See <https://www.create.ac.uk/blog/2021/11/26/the-birth-of-neo-regulation-where-next-for-the-uks-approach-to-platform-regulation/>.
19. Cf. https://www.parlament.ch/de/services/news/Seiten/2021/20210916142551538194158159038_bsd136.aspx [Accessed 25.10.22].

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Annex: Document overview

Governmental overviews and (selected) documents/webpages consulted for the analysis of Covid-19 measures in the seven countries.

Croatia: <https://min-kulture.gov.hr/the-government-of-the-republic-of-croatia-adopted-a-series-of-measures-to-assist-the-cultural-sector-in-order-to-minimise-the-adverse-effects-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/19501> [Overview of Croatian governmental measures]

<https://planoporavka.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Plan%20oporavka%20i%20otpornosti%2C%20srpanj%202021..pdf?vel=13435491> [Croatian National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026]

Germany: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/coronavirus/corona-kultur-1735378> [Overview of German governmental measures and measures from the individual *Bundesländer*]

https://kreativ-bund.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/200527_Verba%CC%88ndeumfrage_KKW.pdf [Report from the German Cultural Council (Deutscher Kulturrat) on pandemic effects on CCI and the effect of support measures]

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/buerokratieabbau/milliardenhilfen-fuer-kultur-und-medien-1850938> [Press release on the support fund *Neustart Kultur*]

Norway: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/kultur-idrett-og-frivillighet/innsiktsartikler/tidslinje-koronatiltak-under-kulturdepartementet/id2828012/> [Timeline and overview of Norwegian governmental measures]

<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/pressemeldinger/2020/regjeringens-straktiltak-for-a-dempe-de-okonomiske-virkningene-av-koronaviruset/id2693442/> [Press release on first round of Norwegian governmental measures]

<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/kud/pressemeldinger/2020/stor-kompensasjonsordning-til-kultur-frivillighet-og-idrett/id2693889/> [Press release on first Norwegian government rescue package for the culture sector]

<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/kud/pressemeldinger/2020/185-nye-milliarder-kroner-til-kultur-idrett-og-frivillighet-bidrar-til-mer-aktivitet/id2704396/> [Press release on expansion of rescue package for the culture sector]

Spain: <https://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/cultura/industriasculturales/linea-liquidez-covid-19.html> [Overview of Spanish governmental measures]

<http://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/actualidad/2020/05/200527-prestaciones-artistas-boe.html> [Press release on unemployment benefits for artists]

<https://cultura.gencat.cat/ca/departament/plans-i-programes/accions-covid/> [Overview of measures from the Government of Catalonia]

<https://www.comunidad.madrid/servicios/informacion-atencion-ciudadano/ayudas-comunidad-madrid-paliar-efectos-crisis-covid-19> [Overview of general measures from the region and city of Madrid, including cultural sector measures]

Sweden: <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/regeringens-arbete-med-coronapandemin/om-kultur-med-anledning-av-covid-19/> [Overview of Swedish governmental measures]

<https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/04/kulturradet-filminstitutet-konstnarsnamnden-och-sveriges-forfattarfond-fordelar-krispengar-till-kulturen> [Press release on division of governmental support between different sub-sectors]

<https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/05/kristod-till-flera-statligt-finansierade-kulturinstitutioner> [Press release on expansion of governmental support package]

<https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/09/kulturens-delar-av-budgeten/> [Press release on state budget on culture, including support measures]

Switzerland: <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/themen/covid19/massnahmen-covid19/chronologie-massnahmen-kultursektor.html> [Timeline and overview of Swiss governmental measures]

<https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/themen/covid19/massnahmen-covid19.html> [Overview of Swiss governmental measures]

<https://prohelvetia.ch/en/press-release/call-for-covid-19-success/> [Information on Covid-19 projects scheme from Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia]

<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2020/162/de> [Decree on the mitigation of economic impact from the Corona virus on the culture sector]

United Kingdom: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/covid19> [Overview of Covid-19 support from Arts Council England]
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/culture-recovery-fund> [Information on the Culture Recovery Fund]
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/financial-support-organisations-outside-national-portfolio> [Information on support for organisations outside the National Portfolio]
<https://www.creativescotland.com/funding/funding-programmes/bridging-bursary> [Information on the Bridging Bursary Fund from Creative Scotland]
<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/250/impact-of-covid19-on-dcms-sectors/> [Governmental inquiry on impact of the pandemic for the CCI and on the effect of the support packages]
<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/250/impact-of-covid19-on-dcms-sectors/publications/written-evidence> [Collected evidence of Covid-19 impact and the effect of support measures]