

## CHALLENGES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY CENTRES (CHITALISHTE) IN THE CONDITIONS OF COVID-19

Vyara Kyurova<sup>1</sup>, Blagovesta Koyundzhiyska-Davidkova<sup>2</sup>

Received: 15.04.2021, Accepted: 30.04.2021

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### Abstract

*The COVID-19 crisis placed the community centres (chitalishte in Bulgarian) in new conditions, which they need to comply with. This unprecedented crisis has impacted the conditions and way of work of all organisations, including the community centres. At the same time, the crisis dictates a new way of behaving and communicating with people. The new conditions require organisations to focus on their functioning in the new digital environment. In this regard, the purpose of this study is to identify the challenges facing community centres as important organisations with socially significant benefits in the crisis COVID-19. The analysis is based on the results of a survey conducted among 26 representatives of the community centres in Blagoevgrad district. Based on the survey, the main problems faced by the community centres in the context of the COVID-19 crisis are identified.*

**Keywords:** community centres; challenges; COVID-19 crisis

**JEL Codes:** D29, D80, O39

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### 1. Introduction

The cultural and creative industries play an important role in the development of society in modern conditions (Madgerova and Kyurova, 2019, p. 103) and especially in the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. Cultural centres (chitalishte in Bulgarian) are defined as specific organisations, which according to the National Statistical Institute (NSI) of the Republic of Bulgaria, belong to the field of cultural and creative industries (NSI, Demographic and Social Statistics, Culture). It should be borne in mind that these are industries based on cultural values, individual creativity, skills and talent, and contribute to the transfer of knowledge and values and the preservation of the EU's tangible and intangible heritage for the present and future generations (Report on a coherent EU policy on the cultural and creative industries

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<sup>1</sup> SWU “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, Faculty of Economics, Associate Professor, PhD, [verivasileva@abv.bg](mailto:verivasileva@abv.bg), ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9776-3148

<sup>2</sup> SWU “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, Faculty of Economics, Chief Assistant Professor, PhD, [vesi\\_8808@abv.bg](mailto:vesi_8808@abv.bg), ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7786-7743

(2016/2072 (INI)). Based on values, the norms and forms of behavior are developed (Filipova, 2021, p. 592).

The ongoing unprecedented COVID-19 crisis is severely damaging the development of the economies of all countries. The COVID-19 crisis is one of the largest in the modern world (Wójcik and Ioannou, 2020), and it is the most unpleasant peacetime shock for the world economy (Hryhoruk, Khrushch, Grygoruk, Gorbatiuk and Prystupa, 2021, p. 63). It has led to the fact that on the one hand, a significant part of the regions and countries of the world have been put under complete lockdown by their respective governments and on the other - to deal with the problem of balancing public health considerations and the economic costs of a persistent lockdown (Gros, Valenti, Valenti and Gros, 2020). Simultaneously, human losses and economic damage are already evident, both for countries with developed economies and for those in developing countries (Hryhoruk, Khrushch, Grygoruk, Gorbatiuk and Prystupa, 2021, pp. 63-64).

It is necessary to keep in mind that in today's society, the mobility of the world's population is growing every year, the movement of people is becoming more and more widespread, the migration of workers is constantly increasing (Zolka, Tsarenko, Kushnir, Tsarenko and Havrik, 2021, p. 376). Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has led to restrictions on the free movement of people from one country to another, which has a negative impact on the functioning and development of organisations, as well as on the overall development of some sectors of individual economies. At the same time, during the pandemic, the main changes in the domestic labour market as well as in the world markets are related to declining employment and labour migration, rising unemployment, falling incomes, loss of jobs and income of individual entrepreneurs (Novikova, Khandii and Shamileva, 2021, pp. 636). All this leads to the restriction of the normal functioning of the organisations, including the community centres, and in certain cases, to their bankruptcy.

The global crisis COVID-19, which started in 2020, had a great impact on the socio-economic life in Bulgaria. It had a negative impact on the activities of organisations in all sectors of the economy and caused changes in their internal and external environment. As a result of the crisis, significant changes have taken place that every organisation needs to deal with. In order to deal with this unusual and relatively new in nature pandemic, organisations are faced with quick and timely decisions. A serious challenge facing organisations is to learn to work in a highly changed and digital environment.

In this context, this paper aims to identify the challenges faced by community centres as important organisations with significant public benefits in the COVID-19 crisis.

## **2. Methodology**

This study has used primary data, which was collected through a survey distributed to 26 community centres. The survey is a self-administered one, based on a representative sampling method.

The study was limited in time and place. The survey was conducted between February-March 2021 in Blagoevgrad region in Bulgaria. Statistical methods were used to analyse and evaluate the results obtained in the study, such as the observation method and the method of grouping, the method of analysis, table method, graph method.

Using questionnaire as a research instrument enables the collection and analysis of quantitative data using descriptive statistics. Data were collected from these community centres using a questionnaire designed by the authors because it corresponds to a high degree to the goals set for the current research.

## **3. Results and discussion**

In times of crisis, outlining the prospects facing organisations in terms of their sustainable development and functioning is essential. This, in turn, will allow organisations to make the right and appropriate decisions. In this context, it is of interest to identify the problems faced by the community centres in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The results of the study are presented in Table 1 show that the respondents define as the most serious problems the fulfilment of their obligations in the digital environment imposed by the pandemic conditions (92.3%) and the insufficiently qualified employees for the implementation of inherent community centre activities in such an environment (89.9%). The main problems are also the concern of people to participate in amateur activities due to the possibility of infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus (71.2%), the non-implementation of the activities set in the annual programme, caused by insufficient participation (68.7%) and the lack of sufficient financial resources to carry out their activities (59.7%). It is noteworthy that the community centres define the lack of modern facilities and technical equipment, meeting the new crisis conditions, as less important problems.

Given the problem of insufficiently qualified staff to carry out inherent community centre activities in a digital environment in the new conditions, it is of interest to establish the areas in which staff need to be trained. In this regard, the study results show that in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, respondents stated that they need to acquire skills to work in a digital environment (working with different platforms and sites, content marketing, email marketing, social networks marketing and others). According to a significant part of the respondents (86.9%), other problems related to the qualification of employees remain those of language qualification and work with computers and other equipment, which stood in front of the community centres before the crisis.

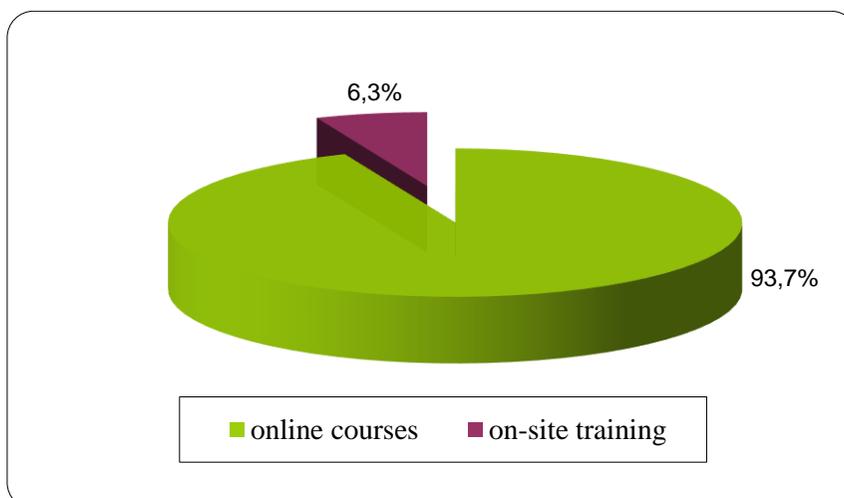
Table 1. Problems of community centres in the conditions of COVID-19

Problems	Respondents, %
fulfilment of obligations in the digital environment imposed by the pandemic conditions	92.3
insufficient qualified staff to implement the inherent community centre activities in the digital environment in the new conditions	89.9
concerns about participating in amateur activities due to the possibility of infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus	71.2
non-implementation of activities set in the annual programme as a result of insufficient number of participations	68.7
lack of sufficient financial resources to carry out the activity	59.7
lack of modern facilities meeting the new crisis conditions	38.5
lack of modern technical equipment meeting the new crisis conditions	36.3

Source: authors' own research

Note: percentages exceed 100% because more than one answer is possible

Figure 1. Preferred forms of training in the conditions of COVID-19

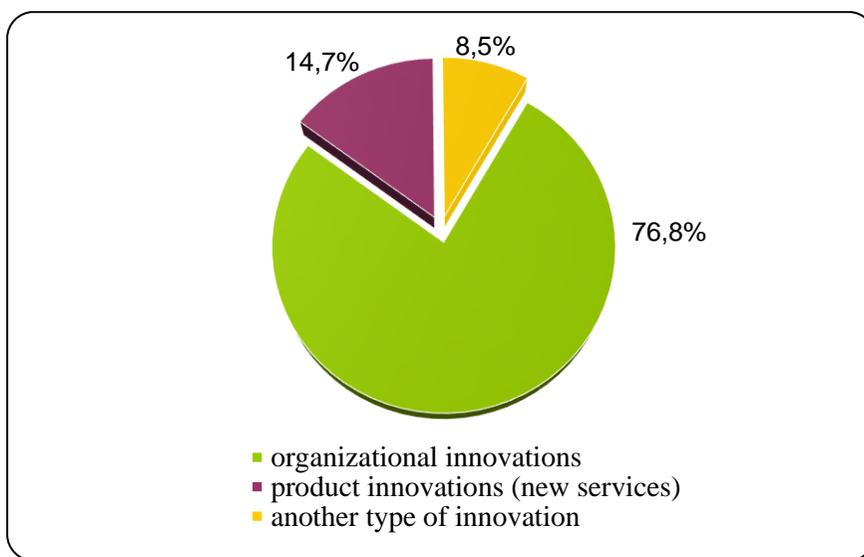


Source: authors' own research

Regarding the forms of training, the respondents indicate that the most appropriate in the conditions of the pandemic crisis COVID-19 is the online training, and among them, the priority is occupied by the online courses (93.7%). It is noteworthy that a small part of the respondents (6.3%) prefer on-site training but in compliance with all anti-epidemiological measures (See Fig. 1).

For the survival and adaptation of the community centres, the effective implementation of the activity related to the innovations and investments is essential, especially in the conditions of a pandemic crisis. The data from fig. 2 show that the share of the cultural centres that implement organisational innovations is predominant (76.8%). The share of community centres with implemented product innovations (new services) is relatively small - 14.7%. Only 8.5% of the respondents indicate the implementation of another type of innovation.

*Figure 2. Innovations implemented by the community centres in the conditions of COVID-19*



*Source:* authors' own research

With regard to the investments made by the community centres, it was found that they are mainly aimed at qualifying the staff (81.6%) to work in the digital environment in the new conditions. Only 18.4% indicate that they have invested in the purchase of equipment.

An important issue related to the progress of the activities carried out by the community centres is the application with a project proposal under programs in the conditions of crisis. These programs also provide the community centres with an opportunity for stable development and sustainability over time under the new

conditions. In this regard, the survey shows that a significant part of the community centres (78.9%) take advantage of this favourable opportunity, thus providing them with rapid adaptation to market changes and coping with competitors.

The rapid orientation of the community centres in terms of cooperation with partners is an indicator of their flexibility and adaptability to the new conditions that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. In this context, the data presented in Table 2 shows that the community centres carry out cooperation mainly with state institutions, municipal administrations, non-governmental organisations, and educational institutions. It is noteworthy that the share of those who cooperate with business representatives and research organisations is not very large.

*Table 2. Partnerships of the community centres in the conditions of COVID-19*

<b>Partners</b>	<b>Respondents, %</b>
administration institutions	62.4
municipal administrations	68.7
NGOs	52.8
educational institutions	50.3
business representatives	26.5
research organisations	21.2

*Source:* authors' own research

*Note:* percentages exceed 100% because more than one answer is possible

The opportunity to access the complete information on the services of community centres is important for the consumers who use their services. Therefore, the choice of advertising media is important, especially in the conditions of the COVID-19 crisis, which significantly limits the direct access to the offered services. That is why it is observed that the community centres focus their efforts mainly on the internet advertising and on using the opportunities of social networks. This shows that they are aware of the need to prioritise the benefits of online advertising rather than traditional advertising tools such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, brochures, banners and more.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Clarifying the challenges facing the community centres is an important issue of practical importance, as their in-depth knowledge is a significant prerequisite for setting guidelines for development and achieving sustainability over time in the new conditions resulting from the COVID-19 crisis.

Knowledge of the problems inherent in the community centres helps to make the right and appropriate decisions and take timely measures in response to dynamic changes in the environment. The practice proves that special attention needs to be paid

to the employees' qualification for dealing with the activity of the community centres in the new digital environment and the creation of the necessary favourable conditions for more effective fulfilment of their duties. At the same time, the theory proves that the staff's training is essential for the success of the community centres in the new conditions. That is why the community centres must focus their efforts and attention on the employees' training in modern information technologies and the solution of the problem with the language competencies and the work with computers and other equipment.

Innovation and investment play an essential role in the development of community centres. The survey results show that the representatives of the community centres should take actions in the direction of the realisation of other types of innovations and in the modernisation of the material and technical base.

A key factor for the success of the community centres in the COVID-19 crisis is the expansion of cooperation with business, including IT companies on the one hand and on the other - with research organisations. In this regard, the effective implementation of communication with partners in the modern world is important for the development of community centres. Moreover, modern researchers have identified communication as a priority due to its significant role in the world of business organisations (Kyurova, 2017, p. 67), including community centres. In addition, the focus of community centres on Internet advertising and the use of social networking opportunities as an essential form of communication is a quick response to new market trends.

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