

## COMPETITIVENESS ISSUES IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR IN PUGLIA REGION DURING COVID-19 TIMES – EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF NETT PROJECT

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### Abstract

*The article aims to analyze some empirical evidence for competitiveness in the cultural sector in the Puglia region during COVID-19 times. In particular, the results of NeTT project, part of the Interreg VA Greece-Italy 2014 – 2020 program, are analyzed. Fourteen cultural operators from various spheres of the cultural life of the region were interviewed and five key dimensions of COVID-19 influence were studied, namely: digital, educational, media, regional and community. These areas are subject to a border evaluation from the regional authorities. The study confirms the research thesis that the COVID-19 pandemic situation can be used as an accelerator for competitiveness in the cultural sector in the Puglia region, and as a key for new sociological, educational, and behavioral patterns and joint artistic interventions.*

**Key words:** cultural sector, regional competitiveness, sustainability, Puglia region, project NeTT

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### Introduction

Culture is one of the most severely affected sectors of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the last months, spending on culture in G7 economics has decreased significantly, between 4-8% in most European countries, for example, 5% in Italy. According to UNESCO reports, at the beginning of September 2020, some 37% of the world heritage sites were still closed and only 26% were partially open (UNESCO, 2020a). According to OECD (OECD, 2020), in many countries the loss of jobs in the sector varies between 0.8-5.5%. Moreover, freelance artists and state cultural institutes receive different financial support during the Covid-19 times. The trend of job losses is especially outlined in countries that are less innovative and technologically backward. Cultural tourism, which is directly

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linked to the cultural and creative industries worldwide, also suffers from serious losses. The World Travel and Tourism Council reported a loss of USD 2.1 trillion for tourism in the world GDP for 2020.

The recovery from the COVID-19 crisis is strongly connected to the digitalization of cultural and creative industries and with the cross-innovations between sectors such as culture, tourism, education, and health and social services. It is expected that regions and cities around the world should be able to benefit from the COVID-19 crisis by changing the model of cultural development and by presenting more competitive forms of cultural content, including initiatives supporting a green transition, developing new local strategies for cultural tourism and offering more pro-environmental behavior. Such a policy is in full synchronization with the objectives of UNESCO Culture 2030, published in 2019, which are: a) environment and resilience for cultural and eco-tourism as an integrated part of the national and regional strategies; b) prosperity and livelihoods in the cultural sector as a direct impact on GDP, entrepreneurship and innovation; c) knowledge and skills to integrate culture for the promotion of competence in education; d) inclusion and participation as an engagement of local communities to have access to IT, social services etc. (UNESCO, 2019).

The focus of the article is two-sided. First of all, it identifies how the competitiveness of a region in the field of culture can be developed and upgraded. Secondly, it sets out a roadmap of possible dimensions, which are of strategic importance for the vitality of the cultural sector and for the improvement of destination competitiveness during COVID-19 times. Thus, the paper aims to analyze some empirical shreds of evidence for competitiveness in the cultural sector in the Puglia region during the COVID-19 times. In particular, the results of the NeTT project, part of the Interreg VA Greece-Italy 2014 – 2020 program, are reported and analyzed.

The research thesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic situation can be used as an accelerator for competitiveness in the cultural sector in the Puglia region, as a key for new sociological, educational, and behavioral patterns and joint artistic interventions.

The rest of the text is structured as follows. First section provides the literature review of the competitiveness in the cultural sector and its interrelated elements. Second section focuses briefly on some data on the competitiveness of the cultural sector in the Puglia region, Italy. Third section deals with a general presentation of the NeTT project. The next sections are consistently dedicated to the methodology of research, discussion of main results, and limitation of the scope of research. The last section summarizes the main findings and conclusions.

## **Theoretical background**

In recent years, researchers have paid increasing attention to the study of the relationship between cultural performance and economic development as an element of the competitiveness of the local and national economy. The relationship between culture and economy reveals the links among culture, society and economic development (Alberti and Giusti, 2012) as well as the growing awareness of regional competitiveness (Bandarin et al, 2011; Pereira Roders and Von Oers, 2011). As mentioned by Kolev (2013), in an increasingly globalized world, some regions win on their competitiveness and flourished as sustainable “learning” regions. According to Klein et al. (2021), the cultural sector has always served as a boost for innovation and has a highly positive influence on regional development. The main challenge to studying the cultural sector is the requirement of appropriate tool construction and the selection of qualitative and quantitative scales which can be properly analyzed. Castellani (2019) underlines that the relationship between culture, innovations and economic development depends also on the individual and collective importance for the meaning of innovation, culture and economic growth. Tekic and Tekic (2021) add that the culture always collects different independent dimensions.

Recently, a concept has also emerged related to the competitiveness of the cultural sector named “cultural sustainability”, which can be defined as the “ongoing ability to engage cultural workers in their work and the presentation of conditions to that work” (Kong, 2012). Zou et al. (2021) summarize that sustainability in the culture consists of some pillars as heritage, vitality, economic viability, diversity, eco-cultural resilience and eco-cultural civilization. Thimm (2019) reports that cultural sustainability promotes better social, economic well-being and ecological sustainability. Fernández et al. (2022) also mention that sustainability cannot be achieved without the contribution of each region because the artistic and historical heritage, the management of cultural resources, and the information and communication technologies in the cultural sector are in a cross relationship with the competitiveness of the regional economy. This concept is strongly valid for regions that depend on tourism and especially in pandemic situations (as COVID-19) of the middle-term period. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the competitive performance of various sectors around the world. Khlystova et al. (2021) confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic articulated the importance of using digital tools and embedding them in a business model generating positive synergies. Based on their study review of 59 scientific papers, six important dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic are recognized that apply to the cultural and creative industries: on cultural entrepreneurs; on museums and libraries; on music industry and festivals; on publishing and journalism; on social media and IT and software sectors. For each of these dimensions the active role

of the digital tools is marked, of online streaming, online teaching, learning, and mentoring as facilitators for the cultural and creative industries, as influencers for changing strategies and becoming more event inclusive.

### **Outlook of the competitiveness of the cultural sector in the Puglia region**

In recent months, the debate on competitiveness has shifted from the market and companies as its main actors for economic growth to the territory as an administrative-geographical entity. The debate is focused on the potential for the development of each region and on the factors for resilience amid a pandemic, including various qualitative assessments such as the assessment of institutions, education, the access to culture, the way of functioning of the labor market, the diffusion of information technologies, etc. In the European Union, the combination of these factors is called the Regional Competitiveness Index (RCI). The index is defined for 268 regions (NUTS-2) for the EU-27 through three main components: basic economic indicators, efficiency and innovation. According to the results of this index, one region is determined as competitive if within two consecutive annual reports there is a better performance by + 5%. Based on this index, important strategic decisions can be formulated during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the European Commission, the RCI 2019 data for the Puglia region (before the COVID-19 crisis) show a slowdown in the region's competitiveness. The Puglia region is positioned at number 235 out of a total of 268 regions (European Commission, 2019). But, it is an interesting fact that thanks to the "innovation" RCI component, the region improves its position and occupies 218<sup>th</sup> place. The conclusions made are that the Puglia region has a serious potential to develop in the field of new technologies and smart projects. Furthermore educational, cultural and scientific activities have been identified as the main areas that can stimulate the regional innovative activity.

According to the Puglia Regional Agency for Technology and Innovation (ARTI, 2020) and considering the challenges for the whole country in the context of COVID-19, the Puglia region retains its innovative potential through active collaboration between different sectors, by attracting human and capital resources. According to the Puglia Creative Cluster, the region's cultural sector is developing two times faster than the average Italian score and its added value represents 4.2% of the regional richness (Distretto Produttivo Puglia Creative, 2018). According to the data of Unioncamere and Symbola (2021), the Puglia region in 2020 was a national leader among all Italian regions with the largest share of companies in performing arts (15.9%). The region represents 4% of employed in the cultural sector in Italy in 2020. The Puglia region has also a very good balance of added value in culture, created by core (traditional) cultural industries and creative (innovative) industries: respectively 1.8% and 2.0% or

in total 3.8% against 5.7% for the whole Italian economy. Overall, the negative change (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) for the Puglia region in 2020 compared to 2019 in value-added from the “Culture” sector is less than the national level: -7.8% compared to -8.1%. The contribution of the Puglia region to the “Culture” sector for 2020 amounts to EUR 2 486.3 million or approximately 3% of the sector’s national contribution to the Italian economy.

In 2019, the Puglia region, in cooperation with the University of Bari Aldo Moro, published a strategic document for the development of culture and creative industries in the region until 2026, *Piil Cultura in Puglia* (Regione Puglia, 2019). This document aims to implement a model for sustainable development (also in the context of the principles of the circular economy), in full synchronization with another important document for the Puglia region, *Puglia 365*. The latter is the strategic framework for local tourism in four seasons and is based on the internationalization strategy in cultural tourism and the quality of the tourist service offered. The abbreviation *Piil* is associated with the main issues of the model in culture, namely: *prodotto/product*, *identità/identity*, *innovazione/innovation*, *impresa/entrepreneurship*, *lavoro/jobs*. The four components build the so-called *Made in Puglia* brand, in which the region has strongly invested in recent years through various projects and funds. The strategic plan of culture, *Piil Cultura in Puglia*, includes several objectives and related specific actions:

1. *Long-term planning* – the goal is to make a better distribution of investments from private and public sectors by encouraging cultural entrepreneurship and creating more startups. At the same time, it is necessary to work on smart and innovative international cultural projects by promoting long-life learning for all cultural operators in the region. Long-term planning also requires the full inclusion of tour operators in one common digital system.

2. *Quality of financing resources* – the goal is to stimulate the economic return on investments from projects through crowdfunding, microcredits, etc. Also, to assess the availability of enough tangible assets for the realization of cultural products and the level of improvement of managerial skills among cultural operators. For this purpose, a special institution was established in Puglia, *Distretto produttivo Puglia Creativa*.

3. *Synergy between public and private sectors* – the aim is to ensure the sustainability of innovations by stimulating the know-how exchange. The networks of theaters, museums, libraries, common tourist routes, etc. are factors to guarantee the large-scale deployment of this synergy.

4. *New entrepreneurial culture* – the aim is to promote cultural and creative industries through the availability of more co-working spaces, IT services, mentoring and advisory, networks with tourism, agriculture, and crafts, trade councils, social media etc. At the same time, European policies in the field of

social benefits, pension schemes, healthcare, and unemployment support for cultural operators must be respected.

5. *Audience development* – the goal is to increase and diversify the audience by studying international best practices and creating expert capacity building.

6. *Workshops and short masters with universities* – the aim is to involve widely cultural management in the education of pupils and students through internships and international exchange. The realization of this goal will help the strong integration of some less developed cities in the region and will facilitate their access to culture and tourism through family subscriptions, smart cards, vouchers, free transport, or other services. In cooperation with universities, it is possible that a three-year calendar for monitoring cultural events be prepared and some quantitative indicators for research in the field of cultural and creative industries be collected, including data in the field of cultural marketing and customer loyalty in cultural and creative industries.

7. *Internationalization and strategic partnerships* – the aim is to ensure the exchange of cultural products, including broader participation in international festivals and international networks.

8. *Monitoring and control, governance, and coordination* – the aim is to create the Regional Observatory for culture (Osservatorio regionale della cultura), which will develop an annual report in three areas: major cultural events, creative industries, institutions for the preservation of cultural and historical heritage. The activities of this Observatory will result in the elaboration of a medium and long-term index (the Puglia Index Global Impact for culture) and the compilation of an identity map of each city in the region.

Based on the data from Piil Cultura in Puglia, we can summarize that this strategic document contributes to a) expanding the range of activity and research in the field of culture and creative industries, tourism, and agriculture; b) expanding the framework of projects in the field of culture and creative industries in cooperation with schools and universities; c) the reorganization of the overall activity of the cultural operators; d) the creation of new indicators for measuring the effectiveness of culture (product, identity, innovation, entrepreneurship, employment, etc.).

The objectives of the strategic document Piil Cultura in Puglia have not changed with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. On the contrary, the partnership between cultural operators and their desire to realize new projects is growing. The impetus of this process is given by the administration of the Puglia region – Dipartimento Turismo, Economia della cultura e valorizzazione del Territorio and Public Apulian Theatre Consortium or Teatro Pubblico Pugliese (TPP) as a regional consortium for arts and culture (Consorzio Regionale per le Arti e la Cultura).

## **Presentation of the NeTT project**

The NeTT project started on 31/05/2018 with a duration of 30 months. The project is part of the Interreg VA Greece – Italy 2014 – 2020 program, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, Priority axis 2, with the objective of the valorization of cultural heritage and natural resources as a territorial asset of the Programme area. A leading beneficiary of the project is the Public Apulian Theatre Consortium (TPP), part of the Puglia region. Eligible partners are the Municipal Theatre of Corfu, Municipal Theatre of Patras, Chamber of commerce Achaia, Fondazione Putruzzelli – Bari. The administration of the Puglia region is an Observer of the project activities.

The specific objectives of NeTT project are to develop synergies and to increase capacity for promoting the development of a sustainable tourism strategy through integrated cultural activities by enhancing inter-cluster skills and by developing innovative products. The project is in line with the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, EUSAIR, pillar 4 “Sustainable tourism”. The NeTT project aimed to create a network between the theatre institutions of Puglia and Regions of Western Greece, with the local economic stakeholders that work in the field of cultural and natural heritage management. Another important aspect is the diffusion of a network that has a common vision for the creation of touristic routes focused on the theater and the performative arts.

The final control and all audit procedures of the NeTT project were successfully completed in 2020. A serious challenge for the realization of the NeTT project was Covid-19. At the same time, the pandemic situation opens up some unexpected opportunities for artistic expression. The NeTT project has given empirical evidence for the relationship between cultural performance at the regional level and innovative partners’ synergies.

## **The methodology of research**

Studying cultural development based on one project is a difficult task, similar to the overall study of culture. During the COVID-19 crisis the cultural and creative sectors, as well as many other sectors of the public life can be assessed only based on qualitative measures. As noted by Castellani (2019) in this field, the most appropriate research approaches are questionnaires, in-depth interviews or various experiments.

In March 2020, the leading partner of NeTT launched a study on thematic topics, subject to the initiatives included in the project. Selected topics were digitalization, regional policy, education, media and community. The research design relied on in-depth interviews with 14 Apulian cultural operators (authors, directors, actors, company directors or managers). The discussion focused on

COVID-19 reflecting on the artistic problems during the pandemic, the use of digital tools and communication with the audience during COVID-19 times, the relationships between culture, regional development, tourism and education during COVID-19 and the possible funding problems and solutions. In addition, it was also considered useful to interview a series of key experts from outside the Puglia region. Finally, the indications of the President of ARTI (Association of Italian Theatrical Networks) and the Coordinator of the Strategic Plan of Culture of the Puglia Region (Piil Cultura) were collected. The aim was to bring new guidelines on the thematic topics during COVID-19 times. The final results of the study were the subject of an extended publication entitled “Indagine sullo sviluppo del teatro in Puglia: project NeTT” (TPP, 2020) and were finalized by the end of 2020.

### **Discussion of results**

The COVID-19 crisis has significantly hampered the implementation of numerous nett partners initiatives. at the same time, the COVID-19 lockdown was an opportunity to reflect on the new exchanging potential and to propose good ideas within the project with the help of cultural operators and key experts. NeTT has become a project that identifies some important dimensions to revitalize the region as a cultural space at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Below is the text which summarized the arguments and main recommendations of the cultural experts with regard to the development of the five dimensions:

*a) Digital dimension* – Digitalization facilitates the production of cultural products in Puglia. Digital technologies offer numerous opportunities in communication as eliminating time and place differences through interactive dialogue. These tools serve to increase the level of education, especially among adolescents aged 10-14. Information technology allows for the redirection of financial resources for projects with a high potential to attract the interest of the older generations also. For example, the green digital tools and platforms provide a new perspective for interdisciplinarity between culture and ecology (Isensee et al., 2020). Innovative digital projects in culture and tourism directly correlate with social inclusion and participation (Taskiran, 2019). A similar concept causes a transformation of the existing business model and fills the gaps for the sustainable orientation of Puglia’s cultural dimensions.

*b) Regional dimension* – The Puglia region needs a strategic approach that supports the internationalization of the local cultural product. During the COVID-19 crisis, continuous funding from European projects and the availability of regional funds would ensure the stability of the cultural sector (KEA, 2020). Audio projects between cross areas of cultural life would enhance the attractiveness of Puglia as a tourist destination. Creating a map of the Puglia



region with a calendar of all possible events, incl. events with typical craft initiatives, carnivals, exhibitions, performances, festivals, etc. in a region which is also combating with the isolation of some rural areas, will have a positive effect. Similar regional cooperation is in line with the European strategy of the cultural routes for sustainable and responsible tourism in the Adriatic and Ionian regions. The promotion of traditional crafts and the creation of new types of cultural cooperation with distinctive local high-quality products represent a core part of this strategic approach (Council of Europe, 2020). According to the European Commission, the medium-sized cities in Southern Europe show a higher vulnerability for the cultural offer and local tourism. For these regions it is crucial to sustain investments in cultural tourism (Montalto et al., 2020). The key experts of the Puglia region confirm the importance of the policy measures in the EU-27 taken by the regional and public authorities such as the extension of structural and project grants (adopted already in 24 countries of the EU-27).

*c) Educational dimension* – In the context of COVID-19, it is suggested that the dialogue between the region, cultural operators, schools and universities should be strengthened. The aim is to create new projects (including audiobooks) to encourage the young generation's interest in culture in the digital age. The basic idea is that every aspect of life should become a learning experience thanks to cultural and creative industries. The strong interaction between education and culture in the age of COVID-19 will also enhance international competitiveness to introduce new educational techniques and learning programs (Kato et al., 2020). According to the new UNESCO guideline and its Roadmap toward education for sustainable development, policymakers and educational leaders need to ensure collaborative learning outcomes for sustainable development. Thus, societies need ideas and projects from the cultural and creative sectors to strengthen this sustainable approach (UNESCO, 2020b).

*d) Media dimension* – The media should show the impact of social distancing by creating general awareness among people (Sambhav, 2020). In 2007, the Apulia Film Commission was launched in Puglia to attract national and international audiovisual productions and promote the region and its natural resources abroad. The idea for the establishment of this commission belongs to the administration of the Puglia region, which together with 45 partner organizations initiates a fund for animated, documentary, television and short films, the so-called Apulia Film Fund. Today, more than 500 productions have chosen the Puglia region as their setting place and more than 25 million euros have been invoiced. Two important projects, Cineporti and Mediateca are successfully encouraging young cultural operators to create film art. According to the interviewees, the positive experience of the Apulia Film Commission is a prerequisite for the creation of other possible

funds in the Puglia region which can support international projects in the field of social media, radio and television in different languages.

e) *Community dimension* – The interviewees emphasize two main points regarding the connection between culture and society during COVID-19 times: 1) the preservation of values during a crisis; 2) the dialogue between institutions and society to preserve the role of culture. As in many regions of the world, also in Puglia the cultural priorities and identity values are the response to the crisis. According to the NeTT cultural operators and experts, the community of the Puglia region needs a high manifestation of cultural and creative issues as an aspiration to its achievement of rewards. Better community understanding of the role of the Puglia cultural brand will help to build simplicity in the institutional engagement (Roy, 2020).

According to the cultural operators and key experts of the NeTT project, all dimensions have a strongly positive impact on the creation of creative artistic products. The most important contribution of the NeTT project was the creation of a network between the participating theaters which, thanks to the project, established a strong collaboration that allowed them to face the sudden lockdown imposed amid the pandemic. This real consortium, animated by a resilient spirit, has supported the theaters in carrying out the planned artistic productions and festivals. Table 1 summarizes the network results of strategic importance for the NeTT project, as reported in the Final Project Report.

**Table 1:** NeTT strategic matrix

Digital capabilities Development of an integrated digital platform	Synergies between different sectors Interrelations between tourism, handicraft, agri-food industries, and cultural associations
Ability to adapt to the crisis Guidelines for a new policy framework on fundraising and co-promotion	Shared community values Sharing innovative integrated artistic products between the Puglia region and the regions of Western Greece

*Source:* The authors

All NeTT activities were carried out largely using social and digital tools. This aspect can be considered as another very important result during COVID-19 because the pandemic prompted the cultural operators involved in the project to test, study and use new and unknown digital technologies. As McMullen et al. (2021) have noted, the digital democratization referred to the interest in generating media content and granting customers, ensures the artist direct access to the audience without mediation or sponsorship.

The model implemented by the NeTT project immediately became a model replicated outside the project by many other cultural operators from the Puglia region and Western Greece.

### **Limitations of research**

This research contains several limitations that may also offer venues for future research. On the one hand, the analysis in the article is based on qualitative measures such as expert assessment and in-depth interviews with key representatives of the cultural sector in the Puglia region. On the other hand, it is necessary to replicate the results obtained for the competitiveness of the cultural sector during a pandemic also in other regions, insofar as the summaries made are based on a specific project.

### **Conclusion**

The study summarizes the importance of cultural competence in times of crisis with an example of project activity in the Puglia region. The analysis confirms that the COVID-19 crisis mobilizes the cultural operators for better artistic ideas and decisions. The dimensions set out by the cultural operators and key experts of the NeTT project are in correlation with the worldwide discussion on these topics. The proposed cross-linkage approach with other sectors as tourism, education, agriculture, etc. can be used to enrich the cultural strategy of the Puglia region up to 2026.

Our findings confirm the theoretical implications from other publications which underline the importance of digitalization in various spheres of public and social life, including the cultural sector. We confirm also the thesis of Boneva (2016) that EU projects have a positive impact on sectors of key importance for the competitiveness of the EU regions.

Our findings also confirm the research thesis that the COVID-19 pandemic situation can be used as an accelerator for competitiveness in the cultural sector in the Puglia region, as a key for new sociological, educational, and behavioral patterns and joint artistic interventions. These interventions are in strong correlation with the efforts of the regional administration. For this reason, it is necessary to strengthen the coordination between the cultural sector and tourism in the region as a factor for long-term sustainable policy, also during COVID-19 times. It is highly recommended that a new approach to communicate EU funds and regional programs in the field of cultural and creative industries to cultural operators, public and private institutions, and local communities should be developed. Furthermore, digital cultural policies and innovative green digitalization tools must be regarded as an integral part of the whole regional policy. Their role is to

help artists and theatrical groups to generate arts and to create creative hubs. It is necessary that the cultural dimension should be incorporated into the social policy and that alternative ideas and sustainable models of artistic creation, production and consumption should be provided due to the specific funds for educational, media, and community involvement.

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