



United Nations  
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Regional Bureau  
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Regional Centre for the  
Safeguarding of Intangible  
Cultural Heritage in  
South-Eastern Europe under  
the auspices of UNESCO

# 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the South-East European Experts Network on Intangible Cultural Heritage

## Intangible Cultural Heritage in emergencies: Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

### *Addressing questions of ICH and resilience in times of crisis*

Online, 26 June 2020



CONCEPT NOTE

## Background

The South-East European Experts Network on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) was established in 2007 by UNESCO, through its Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, in order to support the implementation of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in the region.

The annual Network meetings<sup>1</sup> contribute to enhance a common understanding of opportunities and challenges linked to the safeguarding of ICH as a key asset of South-East European cultural diversity, promoting the sharing of knowledge and good practices on national measures to implement the Convention, and serving as a platform to develop regional and cross-border cooperation.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 14<sup>th</sup> annual network meeting will be adapted to an online format. It will include a specific focus on intangible cultural heritage in emergencies and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region.

As illustrated by an ongoing UNESCO survey on living heritage experiences and the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the crisis goes beyond our physical health, causing profound disruptions in our social and cultural lives. Many festivals and cultural events have been cancelled or postponed, and cultural practices and rituals restricted. This has also resulted in the loss of income for many bearers and practitioners of intangible cultural heritage, many of whom largely operate in the informal sector and risk to be excluded by the measures and packages offered to cultural professionals and entrepreneurs at the national levels.

For some countries in south-eastern Europe, the impact of the crisis has been compounded by the occurrence of other natural disasters in close time proximity, such as the earthquakes that hit Albania in 2019 and Croatia in 2020.

Yet intangible cultural heritage is also adaptive in nature and many communities are turning to their intangible cultural heritage to help respond to and cope with the crisis. Intangible cultural heritage has shown to be a source of social cohesion, inspiration and creativity that can give hope and solidarity during such difficult times. Local and traditional knowledge, particularly regarding agriculture and the environment, can furthermore provide a source of resilience for many communities who face social and economic precarity.

The 14<sup>th</sup> annual meeting will be an opportunity to explore the diverse ways intangible cultural heritage has been impacted by the pandemic and how communities are responding to help strengthen the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in this context.

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<sup>1</sup> Annual meetings took place so far in Arbanasi, Bulgaria (2007); Safranbolu, Turkey (2008); Zagreb, Croatia (2009); Râmnicu-Vâlcea, Romania (2010); Belgrade, Serbia (2011); Athens, Greece (2012); Sofia, Bulgaria (2013); Limassol, Cyprus (2014); Venice, Italy (2015); Supetar, Croatia (2016); Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (2017); Ljubljana, Slovenia (2018) and Cremona, Italy (2019).

At the same time, the current pandemic thus also presents a critical moment to reflect on and discuss the roles of intangible cultural heritage in emergencies, in an area that is also vulnerable to seismic and hydrogeological hazards (as shown, most recently, by the earthquakes that hit Albania in 2019 and Croatia in 2020) .

The meeting is organized by UNESCO (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, in cooperation with the UNESCO Culture Sector – Living Heritage Entity) with the support of the Regional Centre for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in South-East Europe (Category 2 Centre operating under the auspices of UNESCO, based in Sofia, Bulgaria). The meeting is made possible by the annual contribution of Italy to the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe.

For the first time, this annual meeting of the Network bring together experts representing ICH national authorities with the UNESCO-accredited facilitators from the countries concerned, in order to enrich the exchange of ideas and strengthen cooperation between different actors across the region.

## Objectives

The meeting aims to support Member States from South-East Europe by sharing information and good practices and providing opportunities for participants to deepen their understanding of the roles of intangible cultural heritage in emergencies, with a specific focus on experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to achieve this objective, the online meeting is envisioned as a combination of:

- presentations informing on UNESCO's work on intangible cultural heritage in emergencies, including the operational principles and modalities, which were endorsed by the Intergovernmental Committee at its 14<sup>th</sup> session in 2019 ([Decision 14.COM 13](#))
- updates by participants and exchanges on the COVID-19 impact on ICH elements and communities, and on the diverse responses to the emergency, ranging from governmental measures to innovative grassroots actions
- discussions on ways to relaunch ICH activities after the COVID-19 emergency phase, also considering the socio-economic changes that the pandemic may provoke in the long term

The meeting is also an opportunity for networking and advancement in cooperation on safeguarding ICH in South-East Europe, in the spirit of the Network.

## Topics for discussion

### 1. Innovative adaptations: Measures undertaken by practitioners, governments and mediators

Envisioned as a platform for sharing good practices, the session will address the diversity of initiatives witnessed or developed in the past months in response to the pandemic. Participants are invited to deliver presentations on experiences ranging from responses generated within practitioners' groups and communities, to measures undertaken by governments and mediators to relieve the crisis (e.g. financial instruments, support networks, normative or technical aid such as digitization, etc.).

Presentations by participants will be accompanied by examples that came to the fore through the ongoing UNESCO Survey on living heritage experiences and the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of UNESCO's efforts to raise awareness on the challenges and opportunities ICH provides for communities in times of crisis.

### 2. How to re-start activities after COVID-19

The session will provide space for dialogue on the re-activation of ICH processes after the COVID-19 emergency and on future activities planned in the participating countries, also considering the socio-economic changes that the pandemic may provoke in the mid-term.

Attention will be paid especially to ICH practices the viability of which is put at risk by the pandemic, as well as to already fragile and threatened practices on which the pandemic is putting additional burden, in order to foster international dialogue on safeguarding measures.

Finally, this session will include interactive tools to collect data on future actions to be possibly organized within the Network or other relevant regional cooperation frameworks, to develop capacities of relevant players (central and local authorities, accredited facilitators, community actors, etc.) regarding ICH in emergencies.

## Working language

The meeting's working language is English.

## Participants

Experts are invited to participate in representation of ministries of culture and/or other relevant authorities from the Member States covered by the geographical mandate of the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bulgaria; Croatia; Cyprus; Greece; Malta; Montenegro; North Macedonia; Republic of Moldova; Romania; Serbia; Slovenia; and Turkey), plus Austria and Italy as observers.

*As the meeting is organized online, facilitators from the mentioned countries accredited within the UNESCO Global capacity-building network are also invited to participate.*

## Contacts

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\* Cover photo: The procession of Za Krizen ('following the cross') on the island of Hvar, Croatia, took place this year with participants wearing masks and the number of spectators being drastically reduced in response to the coronavirus pandemic. © Vilma Matulic/PIXSELL