

From Live to Digital and *Vice Versa* - Alternative Rock Music Scene at the Balkans during the Pandemic Period of Covid-19

Julijana Papazova, PhD
Bulgaria/Macedonia

Doi: 10.19044/llc.v10no2a4

[URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v10no2a4](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v10no2a4)

Submitted: October 2022

Copyright 2023 Author(s)

Accepted: September 2023

Under Creative Commons BY-NC-ND

Published: 31 October 2023

4.0 OPEN ACCESS

Abstract

This research focuses on a theme that is experienced worldwide, that is, the effects, consequences and challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The two important aims of this research are to analyze and understand the challenges provoked by the pandemic on artistic activities, both at the level of consumption spaces and in terms of music-making processes. This is connected to analyses of music scenes and the alternatives that have developed to face the challenges imposed, with special attention to the role played by digital media as the only option in that particular period. The central methodological approach of this research is qualitative and draws on the methods of text and network analyses, comparative method, observation, digital ethnography and data collection, including interviews/conversations with musicians, journalists, managers and audience. The research findings show that even with the increased use of the Internet (in pre-pandemic and during the pandemic) where people are immobilized, they relate more to the collective musical experience in the physical sphere - clubs, concert halls, open concert spaces. The concert venues created connections and a sense of belonging to a particular community or urban environment.

Keywords: Alternative rock, Balkans, COVID-19 pandemic Lockdown, Social media

Introduction

During the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, the imposition of societal lockdowns in Europe and around the world compelled music artists to swiftly transition to the virtual realm, where live streams became a crucial avenue for both musicians and their audience. As concert venues remained closed, the only viable option was to redirect their attention and efforts towards freely accessible online platforms such as websites, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube for live streaming purposes.

Musical performances possess the potential to deliver profound experiences of social and spatial presence, this holds particular significance for social groups lacking a specific geographical or societal space to call their own,

and who do not identify themselves within such spaces (Stokes, 1994; Wergin, 2010; Holt and Wergin, 2013). Despite the growing prevalence of Internet usage and its role as a platform for networking, people still acknowledge and connect with the profound collective experience of live music performances in physical spaces. These performances serve as a means for musicians and their audience to forge a sense of significance and belonging within their city (Ball, 2010, p. 13).

Within the recent history of alternative rock in the Balkans,¹ there are several clubs and cultural centers that consistently support alternative and indie music bands as well as solo musicians. Examples include the Youth Cultural Center (YCC) in Skopje, Stroeja Club, Terminal 1 in Sofia, Drugstore, and Kvaka in Belgrade. These establishments not only contribute to the specific urban history but also play a part in individual and collective narratives. The presence of these clubs aids in shaping the cultural quality of life within a particular environment. As R. Williams suggests, the "structure of feelings" pertaining to a specific historical context and quality of life is not solely embedded in social life but also exists within cultural and everyday experiences (Williams, 1992, pp. 47, 48).

The connection between a club space and its audience is explored in the second and third sections of Henri Lefebvre's research, which outline three dimensions of social space: "spatial practice" (how space is perceived through our senses), "representations of space" (how space is conceptualized), and "representational spaces" (how space is experienced) (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre suggests that space is created at the intersection of form, concept, and practice. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions have focused on the discourse surrounding spatial reactions during the lockdown period, specifically regarding closed clubs and concert halls. Lefebvre's spatial divisions are expanded to include the dynamics and interactions between the audience and the physical as well as virtual spaces. Thus, in addition to examining physical venues for concerts, this paper incorporates digital streaming technologies to highlight how artists and audiences can engage with each other. Recent studies dedicated to digital communication and the streaming of music also explore a comparative approach between these new forms of digital spaces and Lefebvre's triadic framework of space. According to Robert Prey, we perceive the physical nature of these spaces through their interfaces as we navigate streaming sites through scanning, swiping, and surfing. The music we listen to engulfs us, surrounds us, and affects us. The designs of these sites, shaped by data analysts, programmers, and engineers, who bring their own understanding of space, are contested in their dominance. They are constantly challenged by the experiential space we inhabit (Prey, 2015, p.16).

¹ Author's remark from 14-year fieldwork experience realized at concerts in capital cities of the Balkans.

Methodology

In order to conduct a more comprehensive and constructive research, I chose to analyze the activities of bands, clubs, and media in three capital cities of the Balkans: Belgrade, Skopje, and Sofia. The selection of these three cities was motivated by their cultural similarities, shared language, and intercultural neighbor relationships. The focus of this analysis was on alternative rock music, which was examined at three levels: virtual (internet space), local, and regional. Consequently, the analysis revisited and reevaluated the familiar examination of music scenes in recent musicology studies (Peterson and Bennett, 2004), specifically within the post-crisis period following the lockdown, as we observed a gradual normalization and re-emergence of live performance experiences.

The main objectives of this analysis were to examine concert performances and experiences from two perspectives: live and online. The analysis focused on individual and collective practices, emphasizing the role of online communities during times of crisis. Furthermore, music-making processes were investigated. The aim was to explore the ways in which musicians worked and communicated in both virtual and physical spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, music analysis was conducted, specifically exploring albums and music videos inspired by the pandemic.

This research adopted an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from theoretical sources and conducting ethnographic work to enrich the socio-cultural context and musical practice in the Balkans. Its primary focus was to understand how the alternative rock scene has adapted to the conditions imposed by the pandemic. Theoretical sources from various fields such as musicology, popular music studies, philosophy, digital humanities, urban studies, sociology, and psychology were collected and evaluated to inform and characterize the mixed-method approach employed in this study.

A comparative methodology was employed to analyze concerts organized in specific clubs and livestream events. The analysis was expanded by considering livestream concerts as a social surrogate that evokes nostalgia and memories, while examining music as an emotional coping strategies during challenging times.

For popular music studies, ethnography has become an important research methodology in the investigation of the role of popular music in the everyday life and the way music shapes the construction of personal identities, local communities and national and international scenes. For this reason, ethnographic methodology is an ideal way to study local music scenes (Montano, 2013). Ethnographic research could encourage researchers to experience different relationships, perspectives and values, or to view familiar contexts from an alternative perspective (Cohen, 1993, pp.123-138). For example, during the analysis of the Portland indie scene through the use of ethnographic research, Rebecca Ball had a more authentic experience of the local music culture and provided respondents with the opportunity to engage in research processes (Ball, 2010, p. 47). Therefore, ethnographic methodology, including online ethnography, was employed to study local music scenes. This method involved observation, data collection through attending concerts as well as conducting

interviews with musicians and incorporating their public comments from magazines and social media.

The phenomenology method was also utilized to develop a comprehensive understanding of specific human experiences and moments. These various methods in the mixed approach complement each other, offering insights from different but interconnected perspectives. This was beneficial for the central analysis of the research topic, which takes a 'tripartite approach' to explore the relationship among music, real and virtual spaces, and the post-crisis period. The tripartite theory contributed to the dynamics of local and regional discussions on the research topic, reinterpreting the history of alternative rock music in the Balkans and providing a multi-layered picture of the rock scene from historical and contemporary viewpoints. Digital sources played a crucial role in establishing comparative and dialogical connections between time and place, especially within the context of the pandemic.

The research incorporated the concept of 'places' as explained by urban geographer Ray Hudson. Places are seen as ensembles of material objects, people, and social relationships that embody distinct cultures, meanings, identities, and practices (Hudson, 2006, p. 627). They are contested and continually evolving entities. In sociological and cultural studies, popular music and concert places are analyzed as a kind of record in urban life. One important statement is that popular music opens up questions of cities and their social relations that other kinds of investigations and analyses might not (Lashua, Wagg, Spracklen, Yavuz, 2019, pp. 2, 3).

In this paper, live-streamed concerts and videos were analyzed on two levels, considering their significance before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The phrase 'pandemic media' was used to describe the engagement of the music industry with digital media and wider convergence cultures during this period (Rendell, 2020). Live-streamed concerts were defined based on their temporal aspect rather than their spatial dimension. Although they lacked the physical presence of others (audience, musicians), the real-time experience provided a sense of presence and involvement that made it closer to the 'real thing' compared to virtual music experiences (Vandenberg, Berghman and Schaap, 2021). While this approach was relevant for the pre-pandemic period, during the lockdown in the spring of 2020, livestream concerts (including new videos inspired by the pandemic) offered a different and novel level of experience and treatment. Since online concerts were the only means for performances to take place, the online comment sections provided a platform for engagement and the creation of social ties and a sense of community belonging. The posted comments during livestream concerts before and during COVID-19 indicated that the audience had a need to express their 'presence' during these online events.

Livestream concerts offered a novel experience, building upon the familiarity of pre-COVID livestreams. This created a new subsection within the concert ritual experiences, facilitated through digital networks during the lockdown period when it was the only option for shared experiences. The concept of face-to-face communication and the sense of collectivity found in physical

concert venues was transferred to virtual platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube channels, and artist websites (Bartholomew and Manson, 2020).

In analyzing concerts during the lockdowns in Belgium and the Netherlands, Onderdijk, Acar, and Van Dyck discussed the motivations behind participating in online concerts. They have found that social connectedness was a crucial factor, although digitally evoked social contexts were generally perceived as reduced settings compared to real-life environments. This indicates an increased 'need' for social connectedness combined with a decreased 'experience' of it during the lockdown period (Onderdijk, Acar, and Van Dyck, 2021), supporting the thesis of social surrogacy for social and cultural connections in the virtual sphere.

Psychologist Tamara Dzamonija from the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade examined livestream concerts or quarantine jams² during the lockdown period in Serbia and noted their positive effect on people. These activities fostered a sense of connection, which is both a basic human need and a creative imperative. Music, particularly during this period, fulfills the need for collective activities, regardless of their virtual nature (Mitrović, 2020).

Music has historically played a role in various crises of humanity, such as wars, economic downturns, and political upheavals. As part of the cultural sector, it plays an important role in promoting and enriching local culture and tradition. Geert Hofstede defines culture as a "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" and he analyzes national culture along dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede, 2011).

The overall conditions during the COVID-19 period changed and influenced the creative work of bands and solo musicians. Some artists drew inspiration directly from everyday life during the lockdown, creating albums or songs that reflected this period. Others were motivated to create music or albums without direct inspiration or narration from the pandemic. For this research, the selection of bands or solo artists was based on objective criteria, including published reviews and essays on albums and concerts, published interviews and essays highlighting their importance in the alternative rock scene, releasing albums under small indie labels, and creating cover songs by other bands, as well as producing documentary films about the bands.

Results

Concert activities during the COVID-19 pandemic period Real and Virtual Places

² In March and April, 2020, DJ Raid (Serbia) organized a series of quarantine jams. Participants were: Marcelo, Marko Luis, Boris Bakalov from the band Nicim izazvan. These jams content were a mix of genres like soul, drum and base, etc.

During the 2020 lockdown period lasting around four to five months, most governments in the Balkans took a short-term approach or focused on providing assistance specifically to musicians from the popular music scene, including alternative rock artists.

One notable initiative was the project called 'Culture in the time of Corona' (*Kultura vo vreme na korona*), organized by Skopje City Municipality. This project involved arranging over 40 concerts in various locations in Skopje during April and May 2020, featuring solo musicians and bands from rock, pop, and classical music genres. The musicians participating in these concerts received a monthly salary equivalent to the basic wage. The selection process for this project was carried out through an open call facilitated by the Skopje City Municipality (*Posle 50 maalski koncerti vecher zapira Kultura vo vreme na korona*, 2020). The first livestream concert, part of the "Culture in the time of Corona" project, took place on April 15, 2020, featuring the performance of Lepi Xhoni³ on the rooftop of the House of Culture Koco Racin Building. This particular concert garnered the highest virtual attendance with 4,082 views. Subsequent concerts saw a decline in virtual attendance, with approximately 1,000 viewers each (Culture in the time of Corona, 2020).

Reflecting on the preparations for the event, Lepi Xhoni expressed uncertainty about what to expect. The two-day preparation process served as an experiment for him as a solo musician, allowing him to be flexible and adaptable for a brief period leading up to the performance. Initially, he envisioned the concert as a local event for the neighborhood, but he was surprised to find drones included in the livestream. The rest of the team involved in organizing the concert included director Igor Ivanov-Izi, film workers, and music technicians from the Youth Cultural Center in Skopje. According to Lepi Xhoni the atmosphere during the preparation and livestream was perfect, with all team members being enthusiastic. At that time, the city was under a lockdown curfew, and people spent most of their time at home, making the concert even more significant (Interview of the author with Lepi Xhoni, December 4, 2021, Skopje).

Lepi Xhoni's approach to live performances involved getting into the mood within a couple of minutes, relying on instinct, immersing himself in the situation, and enjoying improvisation. Although there was no physical audience on the rooftop of the Koco Racin Building, curious neighbors from the surrounding buildings provided a form of support, which was particularly valuable given the unusual quietness of the city due to the lockdown. Lepi Xhoni did not anticipate such a large number of virtual viewers—4,082. The day before our interview, Lepi Xhoni received positive feedback from 3-4 people in a club, so even a year and a half later, he still received positive reactions in person. Negative reactions or comments were primarily confined to online platforms.

³ Lepi Xhoni is an alter ego of Ljupa Angelov. Ljupa Angelov is part of the indie music scene in Skopje. He has a couple of alter egos and his music is different within each phase. He was the leader of the band The John active from 2007-2014, and then he continued with the new project Lepi Xhoni. Sometimes he uses his real name Ljupa Angelov. Angelov also collaborated with other artists and bands such as PMG Collective.

This example highlights the political implications associated with the event, as it received support from the local Municipality, which is part of the ruling government. However, Lepi Xhoni cannot attribute a specific political connotation to the organizing process of a cultural event supported by the local government. In Macedonia, where predominantly two political parties exist (right and left), it is common for artists supported by a particular government to face criticism or negative comments from the audience. After the event, Lepi Xhoni continued to follow subsequent livestream concerts. Overall, he observed a decreased appetite for cultural events among audiences following the lockdown. The pandemic situation had a significant impact, reducing his concert activities by 90%. People were, continue to be somewhat fearful, and lacked enthusiasm for cultural experiences in general. Lepi Xhoni metaphorically likened the COVID pandemic to a war without uniforms, with victims and threats, emphasizing that the ongoing experiment persists (Interview of the author with Lepi Xhoni, December 4, 2021, Skopje).

During the same period when the Municipality of Skopje provided assistance to local artists (April and May 2020), the Government of Serbia implemented a resolution granting non-refundable aid payments of 90,000 dinars for March, April, and May to 2,353 independent artists. The total allocated amount reached nearly 212 million dinars. In mid-June, the Ministry of Culture announced that the funds would be transferred to local self-governments, facilitating the distribution of financial aid to artists (Mitrović, 2020). However, despite these payments, the music sector faced a crisis during that time due to limited opportunities for concert activities. Maja Cvetković, a member of the alternative rock band E-Play from Belgrade, mentioned in an interview with the online portal "BBC News *na Srpskom*" in 2020 that concerts were the main source of income for musicians, and with most concerts on hold during that period, musicians found themselves in a state of shock (Mitrović, 2020).

In 2021, the Government of Bulgaria extended support to musicians in the country. In March of that year, the government announced its decision to provide assistance to independent freelance musicians by offering them five monthly minimum wages along with social security packages. Boil Banov, the Minister of Culture, stated that the financial support would be allocated through the National Fund 'Culture' and would involve an open call process ensuring equal opportunities for all musicians to apply (*Covid Pomoshti: Vizhte kolko pari shte poluchat muzikantite na svobodna praktika*, 2021). Just a few days prior to this announcement, a public letter was sent by musicians to various media outlets, addressing Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and explaining their dire situation. Independent musicians were the only sector within the cultural realm that had not received any assistance from official institutions until that point. The letter detailed the immense challenges they faced in maintaining their livelihoods without public performances or concerts. It garnered support from 580 musicians who signed the letter (*Muzikantite na svobodna praktika iskat pomosht ot drzhavata*, 2021).

In 2020, most of the annual festivals in the Balkan region were canceled due to the pandemic. However, some festivals managed to organize live events

during the summer months with limited audiences. For instance, the Zdravo Mladi Festival in Skopje, organized by the Youth Cultural Center, held live performances with restricted attendance. On the other hand, the Taksirat Festival, organized by Password Production in Skopje and traditionally taking place in December since 1999, had to be canceled in 2020. However, starting from 2012, the Taksirat team had incorporated a showcase and PIN conference into the festival program, and in 2020, these events were conducted virtually. In 2021, both the Taksirat Festival and the PIN conference returned to their regular format, allowing for 100% capacity in the venues. The festival manager, Login Kochiski, expressed that his team managed to maintain a sense of normalcy and work continuously despite the crisis (Conversation of the author with Login Kochiski, Youth Cultural Center, Skopje, PIN Conference, November 27, 2021). Tosho Filipovski, the owner of a record store situated in the lobby of the Youth Cultural Center in Skopje, during the PIN Conference, commented that for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, he felt the usual concert energy within the Youth Cultural Center space (Conversation of the author with Tosho Filipovski, Youth Cultural Center, Skopje, PIN Conference, November 26, 2021). In 2021, musician Vasko Atanasoski joined Password Production, and he mentioned that people now appreciate live performances even more, while musicians have become more grateful for the opportunity to perform (Interview of the author with Vasko Atanasoski, December 12, 2021, Skopje).

In Belgrade, during 2020, most clubs and cultural spaces that typically hosted multicultural events were put on hold and had to cancel live events. However, despite the cancellations, cultural center Kvaka 22 (Catch 22) managed to organize a few events throughout the year. In June 2020, the alternative rock band Buč Kesidi performed a secret concert with a very limited audience, and there were a couple of additional concerts and film screenings. However, when the number of COVID-19 cases increased and put a strain on hospitals, Kvaka 22 ceased organizing events for a few months (*Prostor u Beogradu: Kvaka 22 umetnički bastion slobode*, 2020).

For musicians, managers, and club owners in Bulgaria, the period from March to June 2020 was critical. Concerts and festivals were set to reopen during the summer of 2020. However, in the autumn and winter of 2020, music activities were once again halted. Some Bulgarian bands resorted to streaming concerts that reached a worldwide audience, including their home country. These online concerts offered the option for fans and audience members to make donations with a symbolic price of 5 or 10 leva. Interestingly, some bands actually earned more during this period compared to live concerts. Examples include Review, PIV, and *Obraten efekt* (Counter Effect). However, it was widely acknowledged that this was not a long-term solution for the lockdown period. During the summer of 2020 and 2021, music organizers managed to carry out most of their activities. The main challenge was securing performances by big-name artists, as many of them canceled concerts worldwide. Nevertheless, they were able to sign contracts with regional bands and artists and successfully hold their performances (Interview of the author with Nick Todorov, November 27, 2021, PIN Conference, Skopje).

In the summer of 2020, Nick Todorov⁴ organized the Spice Festival in Burgas, Bulgaria, which was one of the rare festivals in Europe and attracted 5000 attendees. Prior to that, Todorov was involved in organizing the Virus Festival from April 24 to 26, 2020. This festival featured online promotion of various content, including kids' shows, cooking shows, and concerts by alternative band *Kerana i kosmonavtite* (*Kerana* and *Cosmonauts*) and hard rock band *Obraten efekt* (*Counter Effect*). The festival was not recorded but was exclusively streamed over the course of three days on www.virusfest.bg. Although concert activities were somewhat normalized during the summer and autumn of 2021, musicians still faced uncertainty about the near future. When comparing live and online concerts, Todorov emphasized that they could not be compared because festival culture holds a different meaning, encompassing aspects such as travel, planning, purchasing tickets and merchandise, and the overall experience of a specific location. Music is intertwined with particular places, cuisine, and climate, making it incomparable to online concerts (Interview of the author with Nick Todorov, November 27, 2021, PIN Conference, Skopje).

During the spring lockdown period in 2020, Martin Mihailov, the owner of clubs Stroeja and Terminal 1 in Sofia, organized livestream concerts featuring local bands such as Froyd, Piranha Ftw, and Coprostasis. These performances took place on the stage in Stroeja for a virtual audience. Prior to the concerts, there was an option for the audience to donate to the artists. However, after a few months, Mihailov acknowledged in an interview that livestream concerts were initially a good option but their popularity quickly faded. The virtual scene had a brief period of activity, and interest waned rapidly. Most of the events turned out to be unprofitable. For instance, Terminal 1 organized two concerts with a total profit of BGN 300, while Stroeja had seven concerts resulting in a total loss of BGN 600. Although the concerts were enjoyable and beneficial for everyone involved, they also carried risks. Mihailov concluded that this situation confirmed the irreplaceable nature of the physical presence and experience of a live concert (Vidinski, 2021).

The Youth Cultural Center (YCC) in Skopje collaborated with the Municipality of Skopje to organize livestream concerts titled "Culture in the Time of Corona" in 2020. Additionally, the music production section of YCC organized several livestream concerts during 2020 and 2021. On May 21, 2020, in collaboration with Cinema Shishka from Ljubljana, YCC organized a livestream concert featuring the Macedonian band Svetlost+Odron Ritual Orchestra and the Slovenian band Oholo! The concert was streamed on YouTube and Facebook (*MKC od vecerva pocnuva so muzicka programa vo sorabotka so kino Siska od Ljubljana*, 2020). At the end of 2020, YCC hosted a virtual New Year's party titled 'Let's Say Goodbye with Style' (*Da te ispratime so stil*). The event was broadcasted on Facebook, YouTube, and TV Edo, featuring

⁴ Nikolay Todorov-Nick is one of the important and active music promoters and organizers on Bulgarian music stage. He is part of the organizations of the festivals: Hills of Rock, Spice Music Festival, Street Food Festival, SRTE Festival.

performances by bands and solo artists such as Superhiks, Vasko Atanasoski, Atheist Rap, Shock Troopers, Aleksandar Veliki, and others. In January 2021, YCC organized a virtual party for the cultural event 'The Birthday of Art' (*Rodenden na umetnosti*), with local bands Pluto's Doubts, Foltin, Iskra, and Svetlost+Odron Ritual Orchestra performing. Furthermore, YCC was one of the few public cultural venues that organized and presented live concerts in open spaces during 2020, including the international music festival *Zdravo mladi* (Hello Youths) and the international film festival Cinedays (extra music program, featuring concerts by local bands Zulu 3.4, ZJM Collective and Ljubojna).

Music creation in time of COVID 19 pandemic period

Repetitor⁵ is an alternative rock garage band founded in 2005 in Belgrade, Serbia. The band has released four albums, with their most recent one titled *Prazan prostor među nama koji može i da ne postoji!* (An Empty Space Between Us Which Could Also Not Exist). This album, which was published in November 2020 by the independent record label Moonlee Records, draws inspiration from the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To commemorate the album's one-year anniversary since its promotion on November 21, 2021, Repetitor shared a post on their Facebook page:

“Yesterday, last year, we released a new album An Empty Space Between Us Which Could Also Not Exist! The epidemic shaped him, but also cursed him to wait for promotion in Belgrade and other larger cities a year later. Sooner or later, the promotion will happen, maybe in the spring! Until then, listen, stream, download, buy our LP's and CD's” (Repetitor, Facebook post, November 21, 2021).

In 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic, Repetitor had a busy concert schedule, performing 35 shows across Europe. However, in 2020, they were only able to carry out two concerts due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The situation began to improve in 2021, and the band was able to perform 20 concerts throughout the year, indicating a partial normalization of their activities (Shows. Repetitor). The band's first concert after a hiatus of two-and-a-half years took place in Ljubljana on November 2, 2021. In a Facebook post announcing

⁵ Repetitor are an alternative garage rock or post-punk trio from Belgrade. They represent one of the most exciting concert attractions, not only in Serbia and the region but in whole Europe. Repetitor have played in clubs and festival stages in over 20 European countries, but also in Russia and China. (Sziget, Exit, Fusion Festival, Eurosonic, Pohoda, Europavox, Rock For People, Loftas, Stereoleto, INmusic, Waves Vienna, Botanique, Arsenal ... are just some of the many festivals).

With their four studio albums: "Sve što vidim je prvi put/Everything I See Is For The First Time" (Excellent Hamster, 2008) "Dobrodošli na okean" / Welcome to the Ocean (Moonlee Records, 2012), "Gde ćeš /Where Are You Going" (Moonlee Records, 2016), "*Prazan prostor među nama koji može i da ne postoji!*" / An Empty Space Between Us Which Could Also Not Exist (2020, Moonlee Records), Repetitor received a great number of positive reviews, but above all, they gained their reputation with fantastic energetic concert performances. During 2018, Repetitor joined Arcade Fire European Tour as the opening act at three concerts. Bio. Repetitor, <https://repetitor.rs/bio>

the show, Repetitor referred to the previous concert as being "a long time ago" or "*tamo u ona davna vremena*". This comment serves as a nostalgic reminder for the band members, highlighting their longing for the everyday interactions and concert experiences that were prevalent before the pandemic crisis.

During the initial months of the pandemic, Boris Vlastelica, a member of Repetitor, emphasized the significance of live audience interaction in an interview. He expressed his preference for in-person experiences over virtual ones. However, he also acknowledged the importance of online events and supported the idea of solidarity and mutual support among musicians during the crisis, echoing the sentiments of journalist Damjan Jovanović (Jovanović, 2020). Repetitor's latest album consists of eight tracks that capture the dual atmosphere of the band's music—energetic, tense, and delicate. The album displays dominant post-punk garage rock riffs, complemented by the trio's incredible energy. This intensity is evident both in their recorded tracks and in their captivating live performances, with Boris, Milica, and Ana Marija,⁶ each contributing their unique talents to the band's sound.

The lyrics of the song *Danima* (Days) (Repetitor. *Danima*, 2020), are directly inspired from the lockdown period.

<p><i>“danima ne izlazim iz kuće na terasi skuplja mi se đubre... lažem sebe da sve sa mnom u redu je korak napred ili nazad svejedno je...”</i></p>	<p>Translation: “<i>I don't leave the house for days on the terrace I am collecting the garbage... I'm lying myself that everything is fine with me</i></p>	<p><i>a step forward or backward is all the same...</i></p>
--	---	---

The songs *Danima* (Days) and *Noćima* (Nights) by Repetitor, featured in their album *Prazan prostor među nama koji može i da ne postoji!*, are generally considered to be some of the band's most serene compositions. These songs reflect the challenging period experienced by the members of Repetitor, particularly the crisis caused by the cancellation of their essential concert events. *Noćima* specifically portrays a tale of loneliness, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both songs share a slow melody and a melancholic mood.

During the initial lockdown, Lepi Xhoni embarked on a personal musical endeavor. Using an acoustic guitar, jazz master, electric piano, and beat sampling, he recorded a new EP titled *Apokalispa Sega* (Apocalypse Now) (Balkan Veliki, 2020) at his home in Skopje. The EP consists of eight tracks and is described as an "audio collage in curfew". The music is interwoven with snippets from news media coverage of COVID-19 and local political events. The album evokes a sense of unease due to the critical nature of the news headlines

⁶ Boris Vlastelica (guitar, voice, synth, bass), Milena Milutinović (drums, bass, voice), Ana-Marija Cupin (bass, voice)

during the spring of 2020, both on a local and global scale. The majority of the tracks is original compositions, with three exceptions: track 3, which is a cover of a song by punk band Badmingtons (Skopje), track 4, a cover of a song by indie musician Aleksandar Veliki (Skopje), and track 7, a cover of a children's song from the Yugoslav period in Serbia, written by Ljubivoje Ršumović.

In early 2020, Bernays Propaganda⁷ planned a European tour, but it had to be canceled due to the declaration of the pandemic. On their now-defunct Facebook page, the band shared ideas on how to virtually experience the tour, connecting with friends, audiences, and favorite moments while traveling. However, as the situation unfolded, the band quickly realized the need to adapt and find the strength to survive. Vasko Atanasoski, the guitarist of Bernays Propaganda, reflected on this, stating, "We were not aware of what would happen and how much our lives would change, and already in March 2020, we realized that we needed to find the strength to survive" (Interview of the author with Vasko Atanasoski, December 12, 2021, Skopje). During the crisis, Vasko took a job in a warehouse, where he worked for several months. The pandemic had both negative and positive impacts on him personally. The band Bernays Propaganda disbanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Vasko's relationship with Kristina Gorovska, the singer came to an end after many years of living and creating together. Despite these challenges, Vasko found the strength to continue working. He also collaborated with another band, 21 Vek (21st Century), consistently throughout the crisis, as the trio found the resilience to keep creating. Vasko commented, "Those who are created for music will survive. The strongest will survive". In addition to his band work, Vasko also pursued a solo music career. In 2021, during the pandemic, he participated in the Indirekt Showcase Festival at Dom Omladine (Youth House) in Belgrade. During conversations with festival organizers, they shared their recent experiences and uncertainties about the future, as things were constantly changing. Vasko expressed that the COVID-19 situation forced artists to find inspiration and create something out of nothing. He acknowledged that the whole concept of living had changed and believed that we were already living in the 22nd century, with the 21st century having passed. Vasko shared his fears of feeling helpless and the realization that certain plans, both professional and personal, had not materialized as intended. Despite the challenges, he continued to find solace in making music. Vasko also mentioned that some members of other bands expressed concerns during rehearsals, as they worried about the health of their loved ones, including parents or partners. However, his band, 21 Vek, did not face this issue.

The aftermath of the crisis has led to varying individual reactions among musicians, primarily characterized by binary attitudes of either having or not

⁷ Bernays Propaganda is an alternative rock or post-punk band founded in Skopje in 2007. The band was active until 2020. It is considered as one of the best alternative rock bands in the Balkans in the last decade. The band received positive reviews from journals and web magazines not only from the region but also from Western Europe, USA, Asia. Bernays Propaganda realized a couple of European tours and one USA tour. The 4 albums "My Personal Holiday" (2009), "*Zabraneta Planeta*" /Forbidden Planet (2013), "*Politika*" / Politics (2016), "*Vtora mladost, treat svetska vojna*" / Second Youth Third World War (2019) are recorded and promoted by Moonlee Records.

having fears regarding work and in-person interactions in public spaces (Interview with Vasko Atanasoski, December 12, 2021, Skopje). During the lockdown, Kristina Gorovska, the singer of Bernays Propaganda, created a home video for the song *Dojde život* (Life has Come Back) (Bernays Propaganda. *Dojde život*, 2020). This song is featured on Bernays Propaganda's latest album, *Vtora mladost treta svetska vojna* (Second Youth Third World War) (2019, Moonlee Records). The title and lyrics of the song are inspired by the political slogan *Dojde život* (Life has Come Back), which was promoted by the Socialist Democratic Union (SDSM) during the election process and the change of government in 2016/2017. The Socialist Democratic Union defeated the ruling party at the time, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). However, despite the new government, the economic and social standards for citizens remained the same. As a result, the lyrics of *Dojde život* convey an ironic message. In March 2020, with the onset of the global pandemic crisis, Kristina Gorovska recorded the home video for *Dojde život*. In the video, she is partially masked, symbolizing the new adjustments and reanalysis of the song's lyrics in the context of ideological analysis influenced primarily by the political crisis in Macedonia over the past more than two decades of political transition, intertwined with the new pandemic crisis. Kristina uses figurative speech allegory:

<i>‘Dojde li život kaj vas?</i>	<i>Vo mene se sobrani!</i>	<i>Life comes, so it goes far ...</i>
<i>Daj, daj mi daj, samo nasmej se daj...</i>	<i>I pak sum pozdrava, mnogu posilna, od sekoj što robuva!!!”</i>	<i>He says: it's not for us! I'm like a gold factory,</i>
<i>Nasmej se, né slikaat! Dojde i život, pa zamina daleku...</i>	<i>Translation: “Does life come to you? Come on, come on, just smile, come on ...</i>	<i>With all the fears and phobias, Gather in me! And again I'm much healthier, much stringer from every slave!!!”</i>
<i>Kaža: ne e za nas! Jas sum ti kako fabrika od zlato, So site stravovi i fobii</i>	<i>Smile, they are taking foto of us!</i>	

Metodi Krstev, the leader of the Bulgarian alternative rock band “No more many more”⁸, shared his personal experience and the band's journey during the lockdown and post-lockdown period. Reflecting on the lockdown period, Krstev remarked, “While the lockdown had a negative impact on many musicians, causing them to pause and assess the situation, it became an opportunity for me to dedicate more time to writing music. As a result, our band managed to create two albums during the COVID-19 pandemic”. In hindsight,

⁸ No More Many More is an alternative rock band founded in 2013 in Sofia. The band is recognized for the explicit social lyrics. Discography: “*Po edin ili drug nachin*” / In one or another way (2017), “*Ne i tozi pat*” / Not and this time (2020), “*Pomogni mi*” / Help Me (2022).

Krstev believes that the “pandemic brought out both the best and worst in people, leading to a greater appreciation for what we have and often take for granted”. These past two years have grounded us and helped us establish our priorities. Although he hopes to avoid a similar situation in the future, Krstev acknowledges that it was somewhat useful in getting to know the people around us better, like an intelligence test (E Interview of the author with Metodi Krstev, February 18, 2022). Regarding the creative process during the pandemic, Krstev expressed his belief that the best songs are often born during challenging times. Personally, the pandemic did not hinder his inspiration, and he even wrote some exceptional lyrics and music. The band adapted to remote work and home recording, resulting in the creation of some of their best songs for the new album. On the other hand, for many musicians, the financial shock and uncertainty forced them to halt all activities temporarily, providing them with an opportunity to rest from constant concert engagements and the demands of being a musician. Notably, Krstev did not particularly enjoy livestream performances. Although the band participated in a livestream concert and a few live shows with limited audiences, some of which were also streamed online, he found the experience less satisfying. Discussing the return to normality after the lockdown, Krstev emphasized the significance of rediscovering the joy of performing in front of a live audience and being among people. He expressed a hope that the lessons learned during the pandemic would encourage deeper reflection, reminding us that everything we have and strive for can vanish unexpectedly. Time is precious, and there is no use in wasting it by complaining that someone else should have done our work (E Interview of the author with Metodi Krstev, February 18, 2022).

Koikoi⁹, one of the prominent indie bands in Serbia, faced significant challenges in 2021 due to the pandemic and the resulting restrictions on concerts and cultural events. Marko Grabež, a musician and actor in the band, shared in an interview that it was one of the most demanding years for their work (Dašić, 2021). Despite these circumstances, their debut album, *Pogled sa strane* (A View from a Side), which combines genres such as rock, ethno, and dance, received positive reviews throughout the region of former Yugoslavia. For the members of the Belgrade alternative rock band Gazorpazorp¹⁰, the pandemic only served to slow down their work, and they could not make a direct comparison between live concerts and livestream performances (E-Interview of the author with Gazorpazorp, March 18, 2022).

In a 2021 interview, Maja Cvetković, the lead singer of E-Play, initiated a discussion with journalist Neven Džodan about the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. They reflected on E-Play's album *Sloboda* (Freedom), which was

⁹ Koikoi is an alternative/indie rock band founded in Belgrade in 2017. The members of the band are: Marko Grabež, Emilija Đorđević, Ivana Miljković, Ivan Pavlović Gizmo. The band mixes different genres like psychedelic rock, art rock, electronica, punk, folk. The lyrics are based on fantasy, art, and slices of life. (<https://koikoi.bandcamp.com>)

¹⁰ Gazorpazorp is an alternative rock band founded in 2016 in Belgrade. The members are: Jasmin Rastić, Damjan Nedelkov, Nikola Bajčetić, Miloš Đerković. The group publishes its EP and the first album for Moonlee Records: the EP #1, in 2018 and the album "*Od vazduha i sunca*" (From air and sun) in 2020.

released in 2018. Cvetković expressed that the word ‘freedom’ gained a deeper meaning for all of them during the quarantine period caused by the coronavirus. The lyrics she initially created for the album did not fully capture the subsequent experiences. Interestingly, the music video for the song *Sloboda* featuring Sloboda Mićalović seemed to predict the anxiety that arises from being confined in a closed space, a feeling that resonated with many people (Džodan, 2021). As mentioned earlier, the analysis of the music video for the song *Dojde život* and the album *Sloboda* by E-Play reveals a new context in the primary content and message of the song and album. The criticism of regional political problems or crises is reevaluated and reinterpreted within the broader global pandemic crisis.

Conclusions

The lockdown period in 2020 forced online concerts to become the sole option for performances, not only in the Balkans but also throughout Europe. During this time, the comment sections of these online events provided an avenue for engagement and allowed the audience to express their presence and communicate. The increased need for social connections coupled with the limited opportunities for direct interaction during the lockdown supports the notion of virtual spaces serving as a social surrogate for cultural connections and the sharing of emotions.

All the clubs and cultural centers analyzed in this study managed to adapt to the lockdown by organizing virtual events, which initially seemed to be the only viable option in the early months of the pandemic. However, according to club managers, most of these virtual activities had a short lifespan, as priority was given to live events that facilitated direct contact between artists and the audience. The reactions and attitudes of both club managers and musicians during the COVID-19 lockdown period were remarkably similar.

Despite the cancellation of live concerts, all the musicians continued to create and work on their craft from their homes or during rehearsals. This held true for all the bands and solo artists included in the music analysis, such as Repetitor, Ljupa Angelov/Lepi Xhoni, Vasko Atanasoski, Koikoi, No more many more, and Gazorpazorp. Many of them also preferred and participated in livestream concerts, however, they also supported virtual promotions as the only option during the lockdown, recognizing them as a means of mutual support, solidarity, and maintaining contact with their audience.

Declarations

Human studies

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Funding statement

The authors did not obtain any funding for this research.

Data availability

All the data are included in the content of the paper.

Competing interest statement

The authors reported no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

References

1. Ball, R. E. (2010). *Portland's Independent Music Scene: The Formation of Community Identities and Alternative Urban Cultural Landscapes*. Master of urban studies thesis. Portland: Portland State University
2. Bartholomew, D. E., and Manson, M. J. (2020). Facebook Rituals: Identifying rituals of social networking sites using structural ritualizing theory. *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 19, 142-150
3. Cohen, Sara. (1993). Ethnography and Popular Music Studies. *Popular Music*, Vol. 12, No. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 23-138
4. Covid Pomoshti: Vizhte kolko pari shte poluchat muzikantite na svobodna praktika. [Covid Help: Read how much help are going to receive the independent musicians] (2021, March 10). *Monitor*, <https://www.monitor.bg/bg/a/view/4-2-mln-lv-za-svobodnite-artisti-v-muzikalnoto-izkustvo-254051>
5. Dašić, M. (2021, December 23). Marko Grabež za Noizz, kako spaja muziku i glumu: Malo se isforsiraš, pa se razboliš, odmoriš, a onda nazad u gas. [Marko Grabež for Noizz, how he connects music and acting. You push yourself and work more, then you get sick, you rest, and then you go back to action]. *Noizz*, <https://noizz.rs/intervju/intervju-sa-markom-grabezom/xe5ds5k>
6. Džodan, N. (2021, August 8). Maja Cvetković (E-Play): Mislila sam da ćemo posle filma "Munje" biti svetske zvede. [Maja Cvetković (E-Play): I thought that after the movie "Lightning" we would be world stars]. *Blic*, <https://www.blic.rs/kultura/maja-cvetkovic-e-play-mislila-sam-da-emo-posle-filma-munje-biti-svetske-zvede/seej2e>
7. Gorovska, K. [Bernays Propaganda] (2020, March 22). *Dojde život*, [Video] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ush_guyPuAs
8. Hofstede, G. (2011). *Culture's Consequences*. SAGE Publications
9. Holt, F. and Wergin, C. (2013). Introduction: Musical Performance and the Changing City. In Fabian Holt and Carsten Wergin (Eds.), *Musical Performance and the Changing City. Post-industrial Contexts in Europe and the United States*. New York, Oxon: Routledge
10. Hudson, R. (2006). Regions and Place: Music, Identity and Place. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30/5, 626-634
11. Jovanović, Damjan. (2020, May 1). Boris Vlastelica (Repetitor): Muzičari se poslednji vraćaju na posao. [Boris Vlastelica (Repetitor):

- Musicians are the last to return to work)] *Balkanrock*, <https://balkanrock.com/intervju/boris-vlastelica-repetitor-muzicari-se-poslednji-vracaju-na-posao/>
12. Kultura vo vreme na korona. [Culture in the time of Corona] (2020, April 15). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9R-YNTsyn7U>
 13. Lashua Brett, Wagg Stephen, Spracklen Karl, Yavuz M.Selim. (2019). Continuing the Conversations: Introducing Volume Two of Sounds and the City. In Brett Lashua, Stephen Wagg, Karl Spracklen, M.Selim Yavuz (Eds.), *Sounds and the City*, Volume 2. Palgrave: Macmillan, 1-12.
 14. Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell
 15. Mitrović, N. (2020, September 17). Muzika u Srbiji i korona virus: Prvi smo stopirani, a poslednji ćemo krenuti da radimo. [Music in Serbia and the corona virus: We were first to stop, and the last to start working]. *BBC News na Srpskom*, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-54069095>
 16. MKC od vecera pocnuva so muzicka programa vo sorabotka so kino Siska od Ljubljana. [MKC from this evening in the music program starts a new collaboration with the cinema Siska from Ljubljana] (2020, May 21). *Republika online*, <https://republika.mk/scena/muzika/mkc-od-vecherva-pochnuva-so-muzichka-programa-vo-sorabotka-so-kino-shishka-od-ljubljana/>
 17. Montano, E. (2013). Ethnography from the inside: Industry-based research in the commercial Sidney EDM scene. *Dancecult*, 5 (2), 113-130
 18. Muzikantite na svobodna praktika iskat pomosht ot drzhavata. [Independent musicians need help from the state institutions] (2021, March 5). *Mediapool*, <https://www.mediapool.bg/muzikantite-na-svobodna-praktika-iskat-pomosht-ot-darzhavata-news319041.html>
 19. Onderdijk, K. E., Acar, F., and Van Dyck, E. (2021). Impact of Lockdown Measures on Joint Music Making: Playing Online and Physically Together. *Frontiers in Psychology*, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.642713/full>
 20. Peterson, A. R and Bennett, A. (Eds.). (2004). *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press
 21. Posle 50 maalski koncerti vecher zapira Kultura vo vreme na korona. (2020, May 10). [After 50 local concerts tonight the project Culture in the Time of Corona is closing] <https://skopje.gov.mk/mk/vesti/2019/10-05-2020-kultura-vo-vreme-na-korona-zavrarno/>
 22. Prey, R. (2015). Henri Lefebvre and the Production of Music Streaming Spaces. *Sociologica Fascicolo 3*, settembre-dicembre, 1-21, doi: 10.2383/82481
 23. Prostor u Beogradu: Kvaka 22 umetnički bastion slobode. [Space in Belgrade: Kvaka 22 artistic bastion of freedom] ((2020, July 16). *Wanted*, <https://wanted.mondo.rs/Lokalno/Price/a38/kultura-centar-kvaka-22-beograd.html>
 24. Rendell, J. (2020). Staying in, rocking out: Online live music portal shows during the coronavirus pandemic. *Convergence: The International*

- Journal of research Into New Media Technologies*,
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1354856520976451>
25. Repetitor. (2020). Danima [Song]. On *Prazan prostor među nama koji može i da ne postoji!* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnNxx7WF2HY> Shows. Repetitor. Last retrieved June 3, 2021, <https://repetitor.rs/shows>.
 26. Repetitor (2020). Noćima [Song]. On *Prazan prostor među nama koji može i da ne postoji!* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1583m1w3ejg>
 27. Repetitor, Facebook post, November 21, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/repetitorbgd/posts/pfbid0oB9h4UoquMLwJf58wDnpYtc9Ss3u8FXTRxUuqc51b98BKEqvzBFCUpSk3rhYd1Mnl?__cft__%5B0%5D=AZUp1-82aJQLJ47ht8eQvzmvbqrsIW6BKdLrhc8tx4cdewpwFX3TFnnQ8HhYNDH6CW4-MWhm6EDwaJKzHR_Wfvvbz2VGQejxJbJpGgxq5jZtvSpx31RsGNyXOO9yljB1PCTqTwqw6Am0bZ4h06OKZ_81rrxadzhHW3LBVdHX8jAuLa7QHbJUNRUJplsYNXUeW6T4Tk_Rq6mh7EJ5i99ckLvV&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R
 28. Stokes, M. (1994). Place, Exchange and Meaning. In M. Stokes (Ed.), *Ethnicity, Identity and Music. The Musical Construction of Place*. Oxford: Berg
 29. Vandenberg, F., Berghman, M., and Schaap, J. (2021). The ‘lonely raver’: music livestream during COVID-19 as a hotline to collective consciousness?. *European Societies*, Volume 23, Issue sup1: European Societies in the Time of the Corona virus, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14616696.2020.1818271>
 30. Vidinski, E. A. Martin Mihailov: Ochakvam razdelenie na obstestvoto na vaksinirani i nevaksinirani. [Martin Mihailov: I expect the society to be divided into vaccinated and unvaccinated] (2021, January 20). *Literaturen Vestnik*, <https://litvestnik.wordpress.com/2021/01/20/мартин-михайлов-очаквам-разделение/>
 31. Wergin, C. (2010). *Kréol Blouz. Musikalische Inszenierungen von Identität und Kultur*. Cologne, Vienna, Weimar: Böhlau
 32. Williams, R. (1992). *The Long Revolution*. London: The Hogarth Press