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Title	Eastern European film festivals: streaming through the covid-19 pandemic
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/39066/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350x.2021.1964218
Date	2022
Citation	Hanzlík, Jan and Mazierska, Ewa Hanna (2022) Eastern European film festivals: streaming through the covid-19 pandemic. <i>Studies in Eastern European Cinema</i> , 13 (1). pp. 38-55. ISSN 2040-350X
Creators	Hanzlík, Jan and Mazierska, Ewa Hanna

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350x.2021.1964218>

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Eastern European film festivals: streaming through the covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted virtually all domains of the film industry, from the production, through distribution to exhibition of films. As opposed to flourishing VOD platforms, cinemas have been hit particularly hard and with them film festivals, which had to choose between postponing their terms, becoming online or hybrid, or being cancelled altogether. The article focuses on festivals that either take place in Eastern Europe or are focused on the cinema of the region. It first briefly outlines the history of film festivals in Eastern Europe, then it summarizes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cinemas and VOD platforms and finally presents three case studies of festivals and their activities during the pandemic. The three festivals streamed at least some films from their programmes and endorsed other activities, such as online industry events, drive-in cinemas and Virtual Reality events. The study concludes that the degree to which film festivals could successfully take place during the pandemic depended more on the type of festival than on its geographical location or geographical focus. Eastern European festivals were not lagging behind the West in this respect and many European festivals were, in fact, cooperating and learning from one another.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; Film festivals; Streaming; Czech Cinema; Polish Cinema

This article examines the place and role of streaming at film festivals either taking place in Eastern Europe or specialising in Eastern European films. It was prompted by two factors. One is the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected practically all spheres of culture and leisure, shifting from their live consumption to consumption at home, chiefly online. The second is a recognition of the growing importance of streaming in film consumption, which has been accelerated by Covid-19. The analysis focuses on three case studies: Polish Film Festival in Gdynia (PPF Gdynia), Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival in Jihlava (Ji.hlava IDFF), and goEast Festival in Wiesbaden. We chose these festivals to account for their different specialisms and traditions, with the PPF being a festival of Polish films, addressed principally to the Polish audience, the Ji.hlava IDFF being the leading documentary festival in the region, and goEast covering a large variety of films from both Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, addressed to international audience, but especially German one.

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We try to establish whether there is a connection between the specificities of these festivals and their willingness to embrace streaming, while taking into account the role of their location in or focus on the region of Eastern Europe.¹ Our research is based on interviews with industry insiders and press releases, and is informed by existing work about streaming and its effect on film consumption at large, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Short history of film festivals in Eastern Europe

The tradition of holding film festivals comes from Europe, rather than the United States and festivals were meant to provide a counterweight to the power of the Academy awards (de Valck 2007). Their origins lie in the 1930s, and especially in recognition of the power of cinema as a means to forge national identity by some European governments, especially Italy, Germany and Russia. In this spirit, the Venice International Film Festival was founded in 1932, as part of the Venice Biennale. The film festival in the French Riviera city of Cannes, originally slated to take place in 1939, was to be a counterweight to the Venice festival. It was designed to celebrate free expression and the films of non-fascist nations. Yet, it had to wait until after the end of WWII, to materialise. In 1951, the Berlin International Film Festival (known as the Berlinale) was launched, completing the triangle of admittedly the most important film festivals in Europe and the world, along with Cannes and Berlin. These festivals were international in nature and championed arthouse cinema.

As for the Eastern bloc, the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (KV IFF) was established as early as 1946 (originally under a different title and in the town of Mariánské Lázně). Its aim gradually shifted from being the vehicle for an expression of national identity and culture in its first edition, through a demonstration of Slavic unity in 1947 and later the unity of socialist countries, to the increasing emphasis on business and international sales between East and West in the 1950s (Bláhová 2015). In 1960 (after two previous attempts in 1955 and 1956), the German Democratic Republic founded an annual documentary film festival in Leipzig exhibiting films from socialist countries and by western leftist filmmakers. It did so in response to the film festival in West Berlin, which showcased 'Hollywood glamour and Western show business [and was] meant to provoke East Berlin and to needle the Soviet Union' (Elsaesser 2005, 84; see also Kötzing n. d.). Yet despite the early emergence of KV IFF and some other reactions to Western festivals, there have been no events in Eastern Europe that would rank among the most important European film festivals. Their absence can be explained by world-system theory, which uses the concepts of core/centre, semi-periphery and periphery² (Wallerstein 1990; Wallerstein 2004; Szczepanik, Zahrádka, and Macek 2020) to show the unequal distribution of economic power among countries. Eastern European countries constituted periphery or semi-periphery of Europe and the realities of the Cold War confirmed and added to this status, as (with small exception) during the period of state socialism the economic distance between countries such as Poland or Hungary and the West had increased. During the state socialist period, these countries were also at the semi-periphery, albeit in a different configuration, with Moscow as the centre. Not surprisingly, in the context of the Eastern bloc, one of the two most important festivals was the Moscow International Film Festival, running regularly since 1959 and held every second year in July, from its inception alternating with the KV IFF, which ran since 1948 as an international film competition. The history of KV IFF points to the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the socialist bloc. Its long history, as

90 well as the fact that Czechoslovakia was among the least peripheral parts of Eastern Europe
91 (Wallerstein 1990, 50), points to its status as the only festival in Eastern Europe, which had
92 a chance to receive 'A' status. However, its linkage to the Moscow festival weakened its
93 connection to other leading European film festivals, whilst augmenting its prestige in
94 Eastern Europe. Still, Eastern European festivals played an important political and cultural
95 balancing role and attempted to build an alternative canon to the European arthouse canon
96 offered by film festivals organized in the West.

97 The fall of the Berlin Wall, on one hand, and the changes in the consumption of films
98 and culture at large, on the other, led to proliferation of film festivals in Eastern Europe.
99 The former facilitated the cultural exchange between the European West and the East, as
100 well as the rest of the world; the latter affected the relation between film festivals and normal
101 distribution. While in the past film festivals in Eastern Europe were seen primarily as a
102 means to augment cinematic and wider cultural circulation within the Eastern bloc, after
103 1989 many film festivals in Eastern Europe, such as New Horizons Festival in Wrocław,
104 which is among larger European film festivals in terms of tickets sold, focus on bringing
105 local audiences to films that are presented as significant artworks of western and global
106 cinema. Hence, these festivals can be seen more as instruments of cultural imperialism,
107 reinforcing a sense of western cultural superiority over its eastern counterpart, than of
108 promoting and boasting national and regional culture, reflecting the economic and social
109 realities of the world as presented by Wallerstein. Moreover, while in the past festivals were
110 seen as a means to increase normal distribution, these days they often replace it (Martinek
111 2014), as both annual film festivals and one-off events are becoming more attractive than
112 standard theatrical distribution (Hanzlík 2017). Increasingly, film festivals are also multi-me-
113 dia affairs, including, apart from film screenings, concerts, fine arts and photo exhibitions,
114 and theatre performances. This reflects a more general trend of 'festivalisation of culture',
115 namely reducing culture to extraordinary 'events', which are consumed from time to time,
116 rather than all year round (Bennett, Taylor, and Woodward 2014). Eastern Europe has not
117 been immune from this trend. Currently, many festivals in Eastern Europe are mega-festi-
118 vals, as the previously mentioned New Horizons Film Festival, which includes concerts, art
119 exhibitions and performances of contemporary dance. Péter Virginás observes in relation
120 to Transilvania International Film Festival, that its organisers are aware that 'the festival
121 crowd is not only constituted by avid cinephiles and, at the same time, that cultural con-
122 sumption preferences may extend beyond cinema' (Virginás 2017).

123 It is difficult to say how many film festivals existed and are currently held in Eastern
124 Europe, in part because not all festivals used to use this name. Many festivals started their
125 existence as 'overviews' and morphed into 'festivals' in the course of time. The Czech
126 National Information and Consulting Centre for Culture registered 47 film festivals in
127 Czechia in 2019 that take place annually (NIPOS 2020). In Poland this number is about 90,
128 according to the report about Polish film festivals (Drzał-Sierocka, et al. 2017, 7). If one-off
129 festival-like events and overviews would have been counted, the number would likely be
130 significantly higher. It is fair to say that most towns and cities with a population exceeding
131 200,000 have some form of film festival, either as a free-standing event or as part of a larger
132 event. These festivals can be divided into several categories. Perhaps the most prestigious
133 category and also the one most visible in media are non-specialised competitive film festi-
134 vals, showing premiere films, with the focus on films from the region. This includes the
135 previously mentioned KV IFF, Warsaw Film Festival, held every year from 1985, and Tallinn

136 Black Nights Film Festival, organised from 1997. In common with older festivals, such as
137 Cannes and Berlin, they are major industry events and can be labelled ‘business festivals’
138 (as opposed to ‘audience festivals’), which in the taxonomy of Mark Peranson involves
139 amongst other things high budgets, orientation on world or international premieres, guests
140 for most films attending the festivals, market and business presence, and major competitions
141 (Peranson 2008, 27). However, even though for example KV IFF dedicates a lot of energy
142 to its film industry activities and events, its international significance in terms of film
143 business is considerably lower than that of its western counterparts, especially Cannes,
144 Berlin, and Venice, and to compensate for this the festival has prided itself in drawing large
145 audiences from the general public too. This can be viewed primarily as a consequence of
146 the above mentioned segmentation of the world into the centre, semi-periphery and periph-
147 ery, and the disinterest of the centre in semi-peripheries and peripheries. Another category
148 are national film festivals, which show films produced in a given country every year. An
149 example is PFF Gdynia, on which we will focus in due course, or Finále Plzeň in Czechia.
150 Then we should list specialised film festivals, such as the CineFest Miskolc International
151 Film Festival, founded in 2004, with a focus on filmmakers under the age of 35. There are
152 currently two larger festivals specialized in animated films in Czechia, Anifilm in Liberec
153 and PAF (Přehlídka animovaného filmu) in Olomouc, the significance of which is obviously
154 incomparable to the similarly specialized but far more prestigious Annecy International
155 Animation Film Festival. Several Eastern European countries have festivals of documentary
156 cinema, such as the already mentioned DOK Leipzig or Ji.hlava IDFF, which will also be
157 detailed below. Then there are film festivals specialising in human rights, such as Media
158 Festival Human in Danger in Lodz, which started in 2000, or One World International
159 Human Rights Documentary Film Festival, which started in 1999 and takes place in cities
160 all around Czechia. Another category are non-specialised festivals held in Eastern Europe,
161 focusing on arthouse cinema from all over the world. Finally, we shall list festivals focused
162 specifically on Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, such festivals are organised in Germany:
163 Cottbus, from 1991 and Wiesbaden, from 2001, reflecting Germany’s status as a bridge
164 between the East and the West and whose mission is to increase the visibility and status of
165 Eastern European films in Germany, Europe and worldwide.

166 The sample of case studies of festivals presented in this study was selected with the
167 above-mentioned context in mind and based on the following further criteria. Firstly, the
168 academic literature has so far been focusing predominantly on Western festivals, whereas
169 Eastern European film festivals have been addressed only marginally (studies of Czech
170 festivals include e.g. Bláhová 2015; Děcká 2014; Havel 2012; Jiříšně 2014; Martinek 2014;
171 studies of Polish festivals include e.g. Pabiś-Orzeszyna 2015; Drzał-Sierocka, et al. 2017).
172 Thus, we wanted to complement the growing body of studies on festivals by analysing
173 nationally or regionally significant festivals that either take place in this region and/or are
174 focused on the region. Secondly, as one of the aims of the study is to assess streaming activ-
175 ities of festivals during (and after) the Covid-19 pandemic, only such festivals were selected
176 that were not cancelled and, on the contrary, actively endorsed and developed their online
177 activities. Thirdly, the selection of cases was led by the logic of maximum variation sampling
178 (Seidman 2006, 52–56; Patton 2015, 428–429): All the cases are considerably different from
179 one another, which makes it possible to cover both their diverging and shared characteristics.
180 However, we have included in the sample only festivals that have had a relatively long tra-
181 dition and their practices had been to a large degree stabilized before the Covid-19

182 pandemic. By this decision we forfeit, for example, a number of vibrant festivals that take
 183 place in the Baltic and Balkan region, although they certainly should be explored in future
 184 research endeavours.

185 Polish Film Festival in Gdynia is a non-specialized festival focused on a national pro-
 186 duction of a single country and at the same time ‘the most important Polish film event’
 187 (Polish Film Festival Gdynia 2021). Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival, as
 188 the title indicates, is a festival specialized on documentary films that features competitions
 189 of both world documentaries and documentaries from the region of Central and Eastern
 190 Europe. The festival characterizes itself as ‘one of the leading European documentary film
 191 festivals and the largest event of its kind in Central and Eastern Europe’ (Ji.hlava IDFF n.
 192 d.). The festival goEast is the only one in the sample that takes place, geographically speak-
 193 ing, outside the former Eastern Bloc, although its focus is on Central and Eastern European
 194 cinema, of which it considers itself to be ‘one of the most important international centres’
 195 (goEast n. d.). Thus, it represents a Western (i.e. central) perspective of the cinema of the
 196 Central and Eastern European (i.e. peripheral or semi-peripheral) region. The presented
 197 study is based on interviews with Tomasz Kolankiewicz, the Artistic Director of the Polish
 198 Film Festival in Gdynia, and Heleen Gerritsen, the Head of goEast. The case study of Ji.hlava
 199 IDFF summarizes a study of the festival by Alice Teslíková (2021) and complements it by
 200 other sources of information, such as interviews in media and film industry debates.

201 Before we turn our attention to the three festivals themselves, we will briefly summarize
 202 the development of the infrastructure that festivals have depended on before and during
 203 the pandemic era.

204 **Public film screenings during covid-19**

205 As film festivals have been, since their beginning, associated with screenings in public
 206 venues, strategies adopted by film festivals facing pandemic Covid-19 necessarily rely on
 207 the situation cinemas find themselves in. The restrictions imposed by states on the operation
 208 of cinemas in response to the Covid-19 pandemic appear to be (at least in the Eastern and
 209 Central European context) similar in different countries, even if their timing was individual.
 210 Cinemas were either completely closed or opened with special hygienic measures, limita-
 211 tions placed on their seating capacity and a ban on the sales of food and drinks. Even when
 212 cinemas were allowed to show films between pandemic waves, the ban on concession stands
 213 made it impossible for multiplexes to reopen because sales of food and drinks can make as
 214 much as one third of their total revenue (DVTV 2021). And even though independent
 215 cinemas are not that heavily dependent on the sales of food and drinks, the closure of
 216 multiplexes negatively affected the whole ecosystem of public film screening.

217 Given the ‘precarious under-capitalised situation’ the arts sector was facing even before
 218 the pandemic (Brown 2020), such restrictions had obviously harsh effects upon cinemas,
 219 many of which would not be able to survive the crisis without a relief provided by govern-
 220 ments. Relief for culture has differed in individual states according to their traditions (e. g.
 221 their involvement in culture before the pandemic) and overall economic standing (Betzler
 222 et al. 2020). The situation was for example, particularly bleak in Slovenia, where arthouse
 223 cinemas saw their state funding cut by half (Vinter 2020) and protests were even held because
 224 of delayed payments by the state to filmmakers (Vinter 2021). Cinemas themselves made
 225 various efforts at alternative screenings of films but such attempts could not possibly replace
 226
 227

228 the normal business model within which they operate (see e. g. Kancereviciute 2020). These
229 included re-establishments of drive-in cinemas, with significant success in the case of
230 Lithuania facilitated by new LED screening technology (Kancereviciute 2021), sales of
231 cinema vouchers (Grynienko 2021), and the so-called ‘virtual cinema’ (Sterritt 2020) –
232 online streaming that allows viewers to pay to a particular physical cinema of their choice
233 for the ‘ticket’ while watching films in their homes.

234 Delayed premieres of American blockbusters in some cases lead to a significant increase
235 in the share of domestic films in cinemas (when they were opened). For example, in Slovakia
236 the share of domestic films almost doubled (Točíková Vojteková 2021) and in the case of
237 Czechia the film *V síti/Caught in the Net* (2020), directed by Vít Klusák and Barbora
238 Chalupová saw a huge success both online and in cinemas during the summer when they
239 were open, as it did not face the competition of American productions (Stejskal 2021). The
240 same situation took place in Poland. Between Polish lockdowns, when Polish cinemas
241 opened again, the biggest success achieved two Polish films, *25 lat niewinności. Sprawa*
242 *Tomka Komendy/25 Years of Innocence. Tomek Komenda Affair* (2020), directed by Jan
243 Holoubek) and *Pętla/Loop* (2020), directed by Patryk Vega, achieving respectively 711,000
244 and 569,000, which was more than Hollywood productions of Warner and Disney
245 (Adamczak 2020b).

246 However, premieres of many films intended for theatrical release were postponed
247 and as the head of the Czech Film Fund Helena Bezděk Fraňková noted in a recent film
248 industry debate, ‘At the moment, the winners of the pandemic are obviously Netflix
249 and Amazon.’ What she meant by that was not only the increasing use of those platforms
250 by viewers but also their production activities, because subscribers have been eager to
251 see new films and series (Telegraph Olomouc 2021), which could only be delivered
252 online during lockdowns. The development led some authors to speculate that VOD
253 platforms will ‘switch consumers from going to movie theatres’ because during lock-
254 downs they have ‘discovered an alternative that is more convenient, affordable, and
255 accessible’ (Sheth 2020, 282). This view, however, fails to recognize the social aspect of
256 cinema going, an activity that has already survived the coming of television and
257 home video.

258 Marijke de Valck and Antoine Damiens noted that festivals organized during the pan-
259 demic in various parts of the world evidenced ‘the resourcefulness, adaptability, and cre-
260 ativity of festival organisers who had to, very quickly, find local solutions to a global calamity’
261 (de Valck and Damiens 2020). As with premieres of films, many film festivals were post-
262 ponied to a more promising date. Some festivals made use of the above-mentioned alterna-
263 tives to regular screenings – from the employment of drive-in cinemas to becoming hybrid
264 or fully online. Venice International Film Festival provided viewers with online access to
265 Virtual Reality content and Virtual Reality panels and meetings where people were able to
266 communicate (Armstrong 2021, 12–13). Both Venice and Sundance Film Festival hosted
267 some physically distanced physical events, sometimes even in distant, ‘satellite’ locations
268 (Armstrong 2021, 10–13). In fact, of major film festivals held annually in Czechia, only the
269 festival Krrr! was completely cancelled in 2020 and this was due to the fact that the festival
270 specializes in screenings of 70 mm films, which is an experience that cannot be reproduced
271 through online streaming (Ševčík 2021, 30–31). Despite all the effort, festivals in various
272 parts of the world faced the problem, as Phil Hobbins-White and Brad Limov put it, of the
273 unsatisfied ‘desire for the energy of a live event and the intimacy of the interactions’ among

filmmakers and between filmmakers and their audiences (Hobbins-White and Limov 2020, 336).

The advantages and disadvantages of streaming

Before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, video-on-demand (VOD) platforms and online viewing had been rapidly developing for a decade, although with differences among individual states and between the centre, semi-periphery and periphery. As Petr Szczepanik, Pavel Zahrádka, and Jakub Macek argued, ‘national borders, center-periphery hierarchies and differences in scale still matter [in the digital era], and perhaps they matter even more than in the analog broadcast era’ (Szczepanik, Zahrádka, and Macek 2020, 1). For example, the growth of the VOD market in the UK has been considerably bigger than in France, Germany, or Italy (Smits 2019, 150). The VOD market in Poland has been less advanced than the markets of Western states but significantly more developed than the markets in Czechia and Hungary (Adamczak 2020a, 150). Such differences notwithstanding, watching TV and movies has been identified as the single most commonly used strategy of coping with isolation during the pandemic (Taylor et al. 2020, 712), and in consequence the year 2020 saw further intensification of online viewing both in the West and in Central and Eastern Europe. This is the case both of global platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon, and various independent VOD platforms, some of which registered an astonishing increase in the number of subscribers. For example, the number of subscribers to the Czech arthouse VOD platform AeroVOD increased tenfold between 2019 and 2020 (Míšková 2021).

Thus, the infrastructure for online streaming was well-developed already before 2020, and when the pandemic arrived it was readily at hand for film festivals. In fact, online film festivals date at least as far back as 2012 (see Nedyalkova 2016), although initially a relatively small part. There were several reasons why festivals embraced streaming. Probably the most important was the limited capacity of the venues, not only in terms of housing the audience, but also showing films in the available slots. As a result, many interesting films, offered to festivals, had no chance to be shown in official programmes. Streaming overcame this problem, although at the cost of creating a two-tier system, with less commercial, indie and short films being more likely exhibited through streaming (Rosen 2013; Powers 2020). Another reason for introducing streaming was a desire to overcome physical boundaries and reach new audiences, not only potential viewers living in other cities and countries, but also those who have problems with accessing cinemas due to disabilities or parenting responsibilities (Powers 2020). Moving online also allowed to engage filmmakers, who otherwise won’t be able to travel to given festivals. A third reason was a grudging recognition that streaming is becoming the main way of accessing films and institutions which ignore this fact would be left behind, as all institutions which reject innovation (Powers 2020).

The role of streaming differed from festival to festival. Whilst in some they played only a small part, adding ‘spice’ to the traditional format, other embraced it as an essential part of their activities. This, to a large extent, depended on the willingness of distributors and filmmakers to engage in this type of exhibition. While initially it was seen as a ‘second-hand’ type of screening, gradually it gained in respectability. One can notice a correlation between the changing status of this type of screening and the growth in prestige of films made by streaming platforms. From this perspective, the production and the subsequent successes of *Roma* (2018), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, which was produced by Netflix and received

320 an Oscar for the best film, played a major part in this shift. The director himself dignified
321 Netflix as a respectable film producer and presented watching film at home as a means of
322 providing an experience on par with watching it on a large screen (Butter 2019). It is thus
323 not surprising that some festivals joined forces with large VOD services, as was the case of
324 the festival South by Southwest, which offered festival films via Amazon Prime Video (see
325 Hobbins-White and Limov 2020).

327 **Polish film festival in Gdynia**

328
329 The purpose of the PFF is the promotion of Polish cinema. It is the oldest and most import-
330 ant festival with such a remit and admittedly the most important festival on the calendar
331 of film festivals in Poland. The PFF emerged in the 1970s out of the initiative of the Gdańsk
332 circle of the 'Żak' Film Discussion Club³ and the Polish Filmmakers Association. The festival
333 exists since 1974; until 1986, the PFF was organised in Gdańsk; then Gdynia became its
334 venue, and the Danuta Baduszkowa Musical Theatre became the Festival Centre. Each year,
335 the PFF audience can familiarise themselves with the recent Polish productions; often Polish
336 films had their premiere at the festival, competing for the Golden Lions and Silver Lions
337 as well as a number of individual awards. The event is attended each year by approximately
338 2,000 film professionals from Poland and abroad: filmmakers, actors, producers and festival
339 programmers. The most important part of the PFF is a competition for the best full-length
340 fiction film, not least because this is one of the most covered events by the Polish media.
341 Moreover, the winners in this competition go to compete in international festivals and for
342 the Oscars. Awards at the PFF also increase the films' taking at the box office.

343 Currently, the Pomeranian Film Foundation in Gdynia is the producer of the PFF, and
344 its organizers are the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Polish Film Institute,
345 the City of Gdynia, the Pomeranian Province Government, the Polish Filmmakers
346 Association. Several dozen institutions, sponsors and media patrons engage in the organ-
347 isation of the event each year. The relation of the Festival to Gdynia is of particular sig-
348 nificance – the PFF is one of the most important events in the life of the city, which
349 essentially influences its development and image.

350 The fact that the PFF is focused on films which collect most of its revenue from screen-
351 ing in cinemas and from which a significant part has their premiere at this festival,
352 explains to a large extent its attitude to streaming: it was little used prior to the Covid-19
353 pandemic, and the purpose of its use was only to hold industry meetings. For this reason
354 the festival's 46th edition in 2020 hung on balance, because distributors of the films which
355 didn't have by this point their cinema premiere, did not want them to be available online
356 before they were exhibited in cinema, in part out of fear of piracy and in part not to
357 undermine the normal order of distribution windows – from cinema to television, via
358 streaming platforms. Given that, and in the light of the second wave of the Covid-19
359 pandemic, the initial decision was to cancel the festival, but it was reversed due to the
360 pressure exerted by the Polish film industry, which did not want to give up on their most
361 important event. However, the festival was moved from its usual time in September to
362 December. These changes put a great pressure on the organisers of the festival, as they
363 had only five weeks to prepare the festival in a new format, making sure that they have
364 the right technology in place and comply with a complex set of requirements made by
365 film distributors.

366 Streaming, inevitably, was employed there more sparingly than at other Polish festivals.
 367 Even though some distributors in the end agreed to stream their films, the audience was
 368 limited, for example to only 2000 viewers, or only accredited guests. Only a small percentage
 369 of films originally planned to be shown were in the end streamed that year in the main
 370 competition and some of the 'heavy-weight' productions, such as *Sweat* (2020) by Magnus
 371 von Horn and *Śniegu już nigdy nie będzie/Never Gonna Snow Again* (2020) by Małgorzata
 372 Szumowska, were not presented because of their distributors' embargo. It could be argued
 373 that this lowered the standard of the competition and the value of the awards. On the other
 374 hand, however, it allowed recognition of the films which, otherwise, might not attract much
 375 attention. In this context it is worth mentioning that the festival's grand prix was awarded
 376 to an animated film *Zabij to i wyjedź z tego miasta/Kill It and Leave This Town*, directed by
 377 Mariusz Wilczyński and it was the first time in its history that an animated film got this
 378 award. Although such a result might be in part attributed to the jury being headed by Lech
 379 Majewski, himself a painter and author of acclaimed animated films, the fact that there
 380 were fewer films in competition could also play its role.

381 While streaming resulted in a big hole at the centre of the festival, it did not affect neg-
 382 atively other parts of the festival, such as short film competition, numerous non-competition
 383 sections and industry meetings, because there was no danger that as result of moving these
 384 events online, much or any revenue would be lost. For example, documentary films normally
 385 do not receive theatre distribution, therefore moving them online does not result in dimin-
 386 ishing their exposure to the audience. It is likely that the opposite was the case, namely
 387 more people watched these films thanks to them being streamed than shown in a real
 388 cinema. In terms of the entire audience, about 50,000 people watched the PFF in 2020, as
 389 opposed to about 70,000 which the festival attracts on average in non-pandemic times.

390 There were two additional advantages of the 'streamisation' of the PFF. One was allowing
 391 more guests to participate in industry events and forums, including regional politicians,
 392 who took part in discussions about developing cinema culture in the Polish regions. It is
 393 likely that such discussions would have a tangible impact on increasing subsidies for the
 394 Polish film industry. Streaming and, more broadly, moving a large part of the Festival
 395 activities online, brought more stakeholders in the Polish industry together. It also allowed
 396 for a better cooperation and coordination between the PFF and other Polish festivals.

397 Another positive effect were savings in the festival budget of about 500,000 Zloties, which
 398 amounted to 10 per cent of its entire budget. This was done thanks to cuts in travel of
 399 (mostly) overseas guests and decreased use of hotels. By the same token, these savings had
 400 a positive environmental effect. When we asked whether these cuts and savings affected
 401 staff working on the festival, Tomasz Kolankiewicz replied that 'no' or only in a minimal
 402 way, as much effort was put in keeping employment at the same level as in the previous
 403 editions, by redeploying staff working 'on the ground' to more virtual tasks. He was not
 404 certain if this was also true about the festival sponsors who provided support in kind, such
 405 as transport of the guests. It is possible that some cuts were made on the way.

406 Despite these positive developments, Kolankiewicz is of a firm view that the future of
 407 the PFF should be in material cinemas rather than online. This is because of the specificity
 408 of 'his' festival, as well as due to a more essential reason of cinema's experience. Evoking
 409 Jean-Luc Godard's insistence that cinema is not the same as films, he mentioned in our
 410 conversation that cinema began with the first public screening of the films by Lumière
 411 brothers, rather than with the invention of machines producing and screening films.

Ji.hlava international documentary film festival

Ji.hlava IDFF was founded by a group of high school students in 1997, and has taken place every year since then. It grew from an event for a small number of people to a festival with an international significance and thousands of visitors, including directors Jørgen Leth, Želimir Žilnik, Krzysztof Zanussi and Cristi Puiu, and scholars Marijke de Valck, Thomas Elsaesser, Aida Vallejo, and Dina Iordanova as guests. It features several industry activities, such as 'Emerging Producers' for a new generation of promising European producers, 'Festival Identity' for festival organisers and programmers, and 'East Silver' market focused on the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The main competition 'Opus Bonum' features films presented in international premieres, other prizes are awarded to films from the region of Central and Eastern Europe and to Czech documentaries. The festival is characteristic of crowded screenings with lively debates and vibrant atmosphere in an otherwise small city in the cold month of October. The transformation of Ji.hlava IDFF from an offline to online version was detailed in a study written by the Head of Production of the festival, Alice Teslíková (2021). Her conclusions will be briefly summarised here and complemented by information from other sources.

Despite the circumstances and the fact that the festival was held solely online, the 2020 edition seemed successful. As opposed to the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia, Ji.hlava IDFF was able to stream 310 films in 2020 (Ji.hlava IDFF 2020, 13). The authors of the festival 'Final Report 2020' note that the streamed 'films registered over 56 thousand views' and, as Marek Hovorka, the Festival Director, noted, '[a]ssuming that one third of streams were watched by two people, we have reached almost 75,000 viewers' (Ji.hlava IDFF 2020, 4; see also Teslíková 2021, 56). According to Hovorka, the number of accredited viewers (not counting journalists and film industry representatives) doubled in comparison to the preceding edition (Sladký 2020), which could mean that the festival was probably able to reach viewers who would not be normally able to come to the festival, were it held offline. And while we cannot evaluate a festival's success using merely audience statistics, especially as in many instances festivals intentionally delimited the numbers of online viewers for individual films, these figures seem big enough to indicate that the organisers' effort had a favourable outcome in the case of Ji.hlava IDFF.

There are several reasons behind this relative success. It was apparent from our interviews that the character of documentary film festivals is in some ways different from festivals of fiction films. Firstly, as Kolankiewicz mentioned in our interview, 'when it comes to documentaries, probably around 95 percent of the films never go to cinemas.' And because they are less often released through regular theatrical distribution, holdback periods are not completely preventing them from being streamed by festivals. Nevertheless, festival streaming needs to be geo-blocked and limited in capacity. Hovorka mentioned that, during the negotiations, the most difficult aspect was to persuade Czech producers and distributors to provide their films to the online edition of Ji.hlava IDFF. This was so because they did not have previous experience with online festivals, while foreign film industry representatives had already taken part in the online editions of CPH:DOX and Visions du Réel documentary film festivals (Sladký 2020, see also Teslíková 2021, 61–62).

Secondly, documentary film festivals do not need to resolve difficulties other festivals may face, such as those targeted at children. The artistic director of Zlín Film Festival – The International Film Festival for Children and Youth, Markéta Pašmová, noted in a film

458 industry debate during the summer 2020 that smaller children cannot read subtitles and
459 films for them need to be classified and presented according to age limits, which is difficult
460 to secure for streaming (KV IFF and Kancelář Kreativní Evropa – Media 2020). That said,
461 Ji.hlava IDFF did organise its traditional small programme for children even in its online
462 version (Teslíková 2021, 56).

463 Thirdly, as Aida Vallejo noted, documentary film has been historically ‘a testing ground’
464 for experimentation ‘that challenged conventions of cinema and expanded its scope to new
465 media landscapes’, as opposed to the technologically and aesthetically more conservative
466 fiction film (Vallejo 2020, 17). Jihlava IDFF demonstrated that documentary cinema can
467 be a testing ground not only in terms of production but also in terms of film exhibition:
468 According to Andrea Slováková, one of Ji.hlava IDFF’s programmers, the festival started
469 ‘the first online platform run by a festival’ as early as 2005 (Slováková 2020b, 201). Thus,
470 the festival, in fact, has been hybrid already since 2006 and streamed some parts of the
471 programme even before the onset of the pandemic (LFŠ 2020). This was surely an advantage
472 as three weeks before the start of Ji.hlava IDFF, the staff was still preparing for an offline
473 version and had to switch to the online version rather fast (Ji.hlava IDFF 2020, 1). Another
474 possible reason behind the success of the festival was the fact that it took place relatively
475 late during the pandemic. Those festivals that were held later in the year were in general
476 able to build on experiences of festivals that preceded them (Volná 2020, 40, see also
477 Teslíková 2021, 81). At least in the case of documentary cinema, it was particularly major
478 Western festivals (CPH:DOX and Vision du Réel) that led the way.

479 As was already mentioned, the festival had to resolve initial scepticism of filmmakers
480 regarding the disruption of the usual sequence of distribution windows – festivals, online
481 distribution, television broadcasting. It also had to withdraw some films from its pro-
482 gramme, even though it was able to include some other films instead (Teslíková 2021,
483 61–64). Some accompanying events had to be cancelled and a traditional section dedicated
484 to Virtual Reality films had to be reduced only to such films that did not require advanced
485 technological devices and could be viewed with adjusted smartphone screens at homes
486 (Slováková 2020a). The industry programme ran successfully online, with some activities
487 registering lower attendance than expected but on the other hand enjoying the participation
488 of guests from afar who would not be normally able to come to Jihlava (Teslíková 2021, 82).
489 The budget of the festival remained, more or less, the same, although its structure changed
490 significantly. As one would expect, the money initially allocated to travel expenses and
491 accommodation of guests had to be moved to fund web development and other technolog-
492 ical issues. Nevertheless, the festival did not suffer any financial losses owing to the support
493 from the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, Czech Film Fund, the City of Jihlava,
494 The Vysočina region, and other institutions, such as embassies (Teslíková 2021, 69 and 82
495 and Sladký 2020). Hovorka mentioned in an interview that there was not a single partner
496 of the festival that would not accept the transformation of the festival to an online edition
497 (Sladký 2020).

498 Teslíková emphasised in her study that the festival was able to reach viewers easily
499 through its online platform but on the other hand, it is not possible for an online event to
500 retain the festival atmosphere in the long term and the online edition also generates cultural
501 and financial losses for the locality where it takes place (Teslíková 2021, 66–67). Hovorka
502 himself in an interview seemed to be in favour of continuing the festival in a hybrid form
503 in the future. As he mentioned, ‘For some people the physical experience [of a festival],

504 meeting with other people and discussions will be a value that will make it worthwhile for
505 them to come to a festival' while others, according to him, may take the opportunity to
506 watch films online during the festival' (Sladký 2020).

508 **GoEast – festival of Central and Eastern European film**

509
510 The goEast film festival, launched in 2001, was founded by Claudia Dillmann, the former
511 director of Deutsches Filminstitut (DIF). In the foreword to the first festival catalogue she
512 wrote: 'The time has come to open ourselves to the thoughts, images, myths and stories of
513 our Eastern neighbours. To their culture. To their films.' These words suggest that the goEast
514 is dedicated to films from Eastern Europe or, more precisely, to the films made in countries,
515 which previously belonged to the Eastern bloc, namely the Soviet Union and the satellite
516 countries.

517 From the outset, the state capital Wiesbaden and the Hessian state government showed
518 considerable interest in goEast and emphasised this engagement with substantial support.
519 It was in Wiesbaden, a city maintaining rich historical ties with Eastern Europe, that the
520 festival found a home in the Caligari FilmBühne, one of Germany's finest cinemas. The
521 Festival normally takes place in the late April, for a week. As a project of Deutsches
522 Filminstitut & Filmmuseum e.V. (DFF), goEast has dedicated itself to the task of bringing
523 the diversity and richness of Central and Eastern European cinema into 'the heart of the
524 West' and to strengthening the place of these prestigious films in the public consciousness,
525 given that Eastern European films are still under-represented in regular cinemas. It includes
526 possibilities for networking; exchange and training are offered within the scope of the
527 EAST-WEST TALENT LAB and other programmes for young talents. An important part
528 of the programme is the Symposium: a series of semi-academic lectures and discussions,
529 often focusing on less-known aspects of the history of Eastern European Cinema. Mazierska
530 took part in several such events, dedicated to the Polish New Wave and the history of Eastern
531 European music video, among others. GoEast receives around 400 professional visitors and
532 12,000 cinema visitors annually.

533 Before 2020, streaming of films at goEast never took place. There were occasional situ-
534 ations when a guest who was unable to travel, joined an event online, for example in a
535 seminar about music videos, when the guest communicated via Skype. These were, however,
536 exceptions. In 2019 a decision was made to record the Symposium for the purpose of
537 archiving it. Preparations for that were made, such as hiring a video crew. In hindsight, this
538 proved a good decision, because when the pandemic happened, some of the organisational
539 changes required for the shift online were already in place. Most of the adjustments needed
540 to be made in the short notice. Due to the fact that the goEast is organised in April-early
541 May, in 2020 it was one of the earliest film festivals globally and the first in Germany which
542 practically coincided with the first wave of the pandemic in Europe. Consequently, orga-
543 nizers of goEast had to make a decision whether to cancel the Festival, postpone it or move
544 online. It chose the last option, as cancelling would mean letting down people working for
545 it, as well as its numerous partners and, of course, the audience. This shift required, among
546 other things, redeploying staff, from working 'on the ground' to working in the digital
547 environment, preparing events taking place online, revamping the festival website to be
548 suitable to the new type of festival and negotiating with guests and partners the new format
549 of film exhibition and events. Unlike the PFF, goEast did not experience problems with the

550 distribution of films, even those which were meant to have their premiere there. One reason
551 for that was limiting the number of viewers to the numbers that would fit in physical cin-
552 emas, which was acceptable for the rights holders. Another is the status of the competition:
553 although the Festival offers awards, the competition is of less importance there than at
554 Gdynia Festival.

555 Asked how it affected the staffing and budget of the festival, namely whether they were
556 able to make savings, Heleen Gerritson replied that they did not. They needed as many people
557 to work during the festival as in normal times and could not reduce their budget, despite
558 cutting costs on travel and hotels for the guests. If anything, they would do with more money.
559 Savings on travelling costs were put largely into overcoming technical problems with organ-
560 ising events online. In terms of screening films, the festival used first Vimeo, due to its relative
561 cheapness and familiarity with this platform, as it was used for professional guests in previous
562 years, but in 2021 it moved to a more specialised platform when the festival was, again, held
563 online. The deal was that the number of tickets sold was capped in line with the usual number
564 of tickets sold in cinemas. According to Gerritson, the festival benefited from the help of
565 dedicated team of programmers from Russia, Poland and Ukraine, whereas the organisers
566 would not be able to afford the technological infrastructure that included interactive elements
567 if they depended on Western European technological companies.

568 In 2020, moving goEast online affected the decision regarding the films included in
569 competition. The Festival decided not to stream premiere films, as it regarded it as unfitting
570 to deprive them of the 'proper premiere'. There was hope that these films would be screened
571 later. For this purpose, the Festival was extended till autumn, with the Symposium taking
572 place in summer. Although the films were not available to the audience in a cinema theatre,
573 the jury could watch them in the cinema. This was because premises could stay open in
574 Germany for business purposes, and the Festival used this loophole to ensure that the jury
575 had access to films in their 'proper' format.

576 We asked whether the changing of the festival formula affected the accessibility of films,
577 especially in relation to disadvantaged viewers, such as people with disabilities and parenting
578 responsibilities. Gerritson responded that it would be impossible to prove, as she had no
579 access to personal characteristics of her viewers, but judging by the viewing figures, the
580 festival reached some new audience. In particular, one film, which in the opinion of
581 Gerritson would probably attract about 30 people in the cinema, was watched online by
582 200 people, suggesting that participation widened considerably. It is also possible that par-
583 ticipation widened due to extending the period of the festival and made some films available
584 in the other parts of the country and other festivals.

585 Apart from screening films, an important part of goEst is the Symposium. This event
586 took place in 2020 in a cinema in a blended form, with some lectures being pre-recorded.
587 By 2021, it moved online entirely. As with Ji.hlava IDFF, an element of the festival took a
588 form of virtual reality, a media activity initiated by goEast already in 2018 and enabled by
589 VR headsets or PCs. A replica of the main festival cinema was created especially for the
590 purpose of its online version of goEast. Visitors could enter this cinema from their PCs
591 wearing avatars and special tours were offered to them.

592 It is likely that certain online aspects of the festival would outlive the pandemic and
593 become its permanent fixture. They included pre-recording lectures for the Symposium,
594 offering the festival films for streaming after the main festival and the use of virtual reality
595 in making the films more accessible and entertaining for the audience.

596 Although, by and large, the shift online can be regarded as very successful in the case of
597 goEast and even allowed it extra publicity thanks to being a pioneer and trend-setter in this
598 respect, its director remains adamant that streaming is not the right direction to take by
599 film festivals. According to her, all platforms used by festivals look similar, the result of
600 which is that all online festivals have the same feel to them. Online events can add 'cherries'
601 to the festival 'cake', but this 'cake' needs to be consumed in the physical space of brick and
602 mortar cinemas, accompanied by people wearing material clothes rather than avatars.
603

604 **Conclusion**

605
606 It is apparent that the ability of individual film festivals to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic
607 in 2020 by going online was significantly influenced by their specific foci and characteristics.
608 For documentary film festivals, such as Ji.hlava IDFF, it was easier to obtain rights for online
609 streaming. On the other side of the spectrum are events such as the Polish Film Festival in
610 Gdynia that are more lavish and exhibit films with high expectations in terms of domestic
611 and international sales, the result of which is that only a limited number of films can be
612 streamed.

613 At the same time, it seems that some aspects of festivals, especially film industry activ-
614 ities, can be held online regardless of the type of festival, and almost as effectively, with
615 some advantages and disadvantages of their online versions. In 2020, both Ji.hlava IDFF
616 and goEast continued with experimentation with Virtual Reality initiated already before
617 the pandemic, as did some major Western festivals such as Venice. These experiments
618 were either in the form of social events or streamed films, the latter of which was facilitated
619 by recent developments of mobile phones that can now be used as VR headsets by viewers
620 at home. In the case of goEast, a drive-in cinema was also used for screenings as a suitable
621 alternative to regular cinemas. However, it seems that such activities were on the margins
622 of physically happening festivals before the pandemic and will probably return to the
623 margins once the physical versions of the festivals can take place again. In all the three
624 cases the festival organisers plan to go back to physical cinemas when they are allowed.
625 Again, only the documentary film festival in the sample, Ji.hlava IDFF, seemed really
626 enthusiastic about retaining some of its online activities in the post-pandemic era and
627 expanding on its hybrid form initiated already before the pandemic.

628 It is clear that festivals taking place in the region of Central and Eastern Europe or
629 focused on the cinema of this region are relatively less influential than their western coun-
630 terparts in terms of cultural prestige or international sales. But in the global era (despite
631 current limitations on travelling), festivals in general were able to learn from one another
632 and share their experiences. In this context festivals in Eastern Europe or focused on
633 Eastern European films were not sidelined but instead they made use of all known options
634 and developed ways to get to viewers in the difficult times. In the case of the goEast festival,
635 they were even trailblazers, due to adopting early the online format, which was recognised
636 by the media. Given that Eastern Europe is often seen as the province of Europe, lagging
637 behind the more advanced West, we can thus argue that this was not the case in imple-
638 menting this technological innovation. At the same time, in this part of Europe we find
639 great attachment to the traditional format of film screening, perhaps resulting from the
640 fact that in Eastern Europe cinema is still seen as a civic institution, to a large extent com-
641 peting with political authorities in forging imagined communities. People involved in

festivals seem to be weary that online festivals would lose this role and, in our opinion, this anxiety is justified.

Notes

1. We use the term “Eastern Europe” here in the historical-political sense, i. e. to denote former state-socialist countries in both Central and Eastern part of Europe.
2. Some authors complement these terms by the concept of semi-core (Bohle and Greskovits 2012).
3. This reflects the strong involvement of film clubs in development of film culture. Virtually all Polish film festivals were children of film clubs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734) and by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic (project TL04000421).

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