



ESU-Information

Endlich wieder Volksfeste! Fairgrounds again at last!

Enfin, le retour des fêtes foraines !

European Showmen's Union Annual Report 2022



Photo: ESU

After more than two years in which most fairgrounds could not take place at all or only under extreme restrictions due to the Corona pandemic, things finally got going again at the fairgrounds in Europe in 2022. The national ESU associations reported a good start and a further positive course of the season. It was evident everywhere that people were returning to the city centres and celebrating their new-found freedom together.

The European Showmen's Union used the start of the season as an opportunity to point out the importance of fairgrounds as a cultural asset for the development of cities and villages after the Corona pandemic. After all, the future viability of European city centres depends to a large extent on their vitality and urbanity. Inner cities where life pulsates, where trade and communication can flourish, have decisive advantages over centres that

are neglected by urban development. For centuries, the fairgrounds and Christmas markets have been among the most important events in the calendar of communities large and small.

The fairgrounds offer the best example of living European culture and tradition. With their colourful offer of entertainment and amusement, they shape life in the cities. The heart of the fairgrounds beats in the city centres. This is where they originated and where their future must continue to lie.

From time immemorial, the fairgrounds have been more than just a place of entertainment. Although the colourful range of rides and sales is still the most important reason for visiting a fairground, the interpersonal interaction is invaluable. Fairgrounds offer the space for people to come into contact with each other without obligation. They are places of encounter and the centre of public life.

The Corona crisis has hit many economic sectors in Europe, including the fairground industry, very hard. But overcoming the crisis also opens up new opportunities. It is a matter of filling the city centres with life again. Fairgrounds are a guarantee for this.

Below is a summary of the ESU's working topics in 2022:



Video conference of the ESU Presidium with the Board of the Norwegian Circus and Showmen's Association (clockwise from top left): Vice President Atze Lubach-Koers, Deputy Secretary General Nina Crommelin, President Albert Ritter, Kirsti Egedes, Are Arnardo, Arne Gronesby, Grete Norberg, Secretary General Steve Severeyns, Ida Johansen. Photo: ESU

ESU Presidium in discussion with Norwegian Circus and Showmen's Association

The topics of labour shortage at the fairgrounds and showman transport were the focus of a video conference of the European Showmen's Union with the newly elected board of the Norwegian Circus and Showmen's Association Norsk Circus- og Tivolieierforening on 9 March. From the ESU side President Albert Ritter, Deputy General Secretary Nina Crommelin, Vice-President Atze Lubach-Koers and General Secretary Steve Severeyns

took part in the discussion; the ESU member federation from Norway was represented by President Are Arnardo and board members Kirsti Egedes, Arne Gronesby, Ida Johansen and Grete Norberg.

The Norwegian colleagues reported great difficulties in the placement of foreign workers, for example from Romania. The employment period for Romanian seasonal workers is limited to three months in Norway and this means a massive administrative and cost burden for the showmen's and circus companies when the season lasts well over six months. Another main topic at the video talk was the Norwegian Circus and Showmen's Association's demand for exemption regulations for showmen's transports, as they already apply in many other European countries. In this context, President Albert Ritter referred to the ESU position, which affirms that showmen are not professional drivers. President Ritter: "Showmen transport their own inventory in order to drive to the fairgrounds and earn their money there. There is a clear demarcation between commercial goods transport and the showman's trade. We showmen do not earn our money by transporting things. Therefore, exemptions for showmen's transports are also mandatory in Norway." The ESU Presidium pledged its support in the negotiations of the Norwegian Circus and Showmen's Association with the competent authorities.

Norway, like many other ESU member nations, will seek to have the fairgrounds included in the national list of countries as an intangible cultural heritage. The ESU will also support its member association on this issue. The effects of the Corona pandemic on the European showmen's trade and the fairgrounds were another focus of the consultations.

ESU Presidium discusses new start for the fairgrounds in Europe

The ESU Presidium met on 22 March in a video session to discuss current association topics. The main topic was the exchange about the new start of the fairgrounds in the European countries after more than two years of the Corona pandemic. In detail, it was about the consultation of the corona protection measures in Europe and the ESU's demand for reliable framework conditions. Notwithstanding the opening of the fairgrounds, which the ESU has been demanding for a long time, the Presidium emphasised the necessity of state support for the enterprises. According to President Albert Ritter, the pandemic has led the European fairground industry into its most serious crisis to date. Furthermore, not only thousands of jobs were at stake, but also the existence of the centuries-old traditional fairground culture in Europe.



The Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage provides information about the cultural heritage of the fairground in the Netherlands on its homepage. Photo: Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage

Fairgrounds in the Netherlands recognised as national intangible cultural heritage

The fairgrounds in the Netherlands, which are visited by millions of people every year, have not only been a popular leisure product for centuries, but they also stand for the citizens as an important part of the traditional lively fairground culture. This fairground culture has been included in the national list of the intangible cultural heritage of the Netherlands in 2022, as the responsible Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland (KIEN) announced in Arnhem on 13 July. Behind the success, which is so important for the future of the fairgrounds and the showman's trade in the Netherlands, is the "Cultural Heritage Fairground" working group, which had submitted the application. The committee is made up of representatives of the Dutch ESU member associations BOVAK and N.K.B., organisers, municipalities, cultural experts and other organisations associated with the fairground industry.

"The fairground culture is a very living culture with a centuries-old history and special characteristics and values," explained cultural expert Karel Loeff, one of the members of the working group. According to the working group, the intangible heritage of the fairground culture is carried by several communities: besides the showmen's families, it is the citizens of a town or village who celebrate the fair. The working group hopes that the entry in the national register will help to keep the traditions alive so that they can be continued and passed on to future generations. Part of the application is a so-called safeguarding plan, which also lists the measures to be taken. In the coming years, the Funfair Heritage Foundation will accompany the fairground communities to ensure that the fairground culture remains a living intangible heritage.

The European Showmen's Union congratulated the Heritage Fairground Working Group and its national federations N.K.B. and BOVAK for the great success.

The ESU and its member associations have been campaigning for years for the recognition of European fairground culture as intangible cultural heritage in the sense of

the UNESCO Convention. In France, Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Ireland and now also in the Netherlands, the fairgrounds have already been included in the national country lists.



Moritat singers spread news at fairs until the 19th century. Photo: ESU

ESU supports EU research project "Science at the Fair".

"Science at the Fair" is the name of a project supported by the European Union at the University of Antwerp. A team of students led by research professor Nele Wynants aims to investigate the role of travelling showmen and women in communicating and publicising science and technology at Western European fairgrounds between 1850 and 1914. The project is based on the hypothesis that fairgrounds in this period were not only local popular events, but also centres of international exchange. For example, travelling showmen and women helped to spread innovations in science. The Science at the Fair team will, over a five-year period, analyse the practices of scientific displays across national borders.

UNESCO's recognition of traditional European fairground culture, which the European Showmen's Union has been promoting for many years, played a key role in the creation of the Science at the Fair project. Steve Severeyns, ESU General Secretary and General Secretary in the Belgian showmen's association La Défense des Forains Belges, explained that the University of Antwerp had approached the Belgian ESU association with reference to the entry of Belgian fairgrounds in the national list of recognised cultural assets. Steve Severeyns: "We have been asked to support the project with our know-how, archives and showmen's chronicles. It is a European project in which the ESU and its national associations are involved."



The issue of labour shortages at fairgrounds has been a focus of ESU work for years and is intensively discussed at association events, such as in 2020 in Vienna. Photo: ESU

Lack of manpower threatens the future of European fairground culture

The ESU Presidium used the balance sheet of the 2022 fairground season in Europe as an opportunity to point out a pressing problem of the fairground companies: The industry lacks employees. "The lack of staff is now endangering the future of European fairground culture," emphasised President Albert Ritter, calling the situation: "Dramatic!" While the shortage of workers has been a major problem for showmen's families all over Europe for years, the showmen's president said, Corona has made the situation much worse. Albert Ritter explained: "We were the industry in Europe that was forcibly shut down the longest of all. As a result, we lost employees who are now established in other professions and do not want to return. The consequences are visible again and again, also for fairground visitors; namely when, for example, a showman's company has to cancel an event and his ride is not represented at a fairground. The companies simply lack the staff for transport, assembly and dismantling as well as operation. The search is not only for qualified employees, but also for simple helpers."

In these difficult times for the European showmanship industry, the European Showmen's Union called for political support. According to President Ritter, the engagement of foreign workers still involves a lot of bureaucracy. "It cannot be," said Albert Ritter, "that the placement of a foreign worker ultimately fails because an embassy needs months to issue a visa."

ESU President Albert Ritter pointed out that cancellations of fairgrounds due to a lack of staff would have serious economic consequences not only for the European fairground industry, but for all industries that are closely linked to the organisation of a fairground, such as the hotel industry, retail trade or taxi companies.

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