



Maastricht University

**HOW CAN THE EUROPEAN CAPITALS
OF CULTURE BALANCE THE
'UNITED IN DIVERSITY' CONCEPT?**

Dr. Nicole Basaraba  0000-0003-1753-9160

[linkedin.com/in/nicolebasaraba/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/nicolebasaraba/)

Maastricht University, The Netherlands

POLICY BRIEF – 1/2022

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OVERVIEW

This policy brief focuses on how culture is expressed and can be represented through a move towards sharing heritage, identity, and the citizens' perspectives on the local, national, and European levels within the European Commissions' European Capitals of Culture initiative. This brief is based on a research article that was produced by Dr. Nicole Basaraba, Postdoctoral Researcher at Studio Europa Maastricht.

This policy brief is relevant for:

European Commission	<i>It makes a series of recommendations for future adjustments to the communication requirements and the evaluation process of the European of Capitals of Culture (ECOC) Initiative.</i>
National Governments	<i>It highlights methods that nations can look at for fostering regional and international partnerships to achieve the "European dimension" of the ECOC programme requirements.</i>
Municipal Governments	<i>It provides suggestions on how to communicate a city's local identity and culture and continue to a legacy for the ECOC title after the year's events are completed.</i>
Creative Industries, Cultural Heritage, and Tourism Sectors	<i>It encourages creative industry professionals (e.g., event programme designers) to collaborate further with the cultural heritage sector to develop unique programming for different target audiences.</i>

Abstract:

This policy brief is based on a research study carried out in 2021 on the conceptualisation and expression of cultural diversity and unity within the European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) initiative using a case study approach. Previous case studies have commonly examined the impacts of the ECOC programmes from a single-city perspective and used quantitative and economic-focused approaches. Since the ECOC was intended to showcase the diverse cultures in Europe, a cultural discourse analysis was applied to eight winning cities between 2015 and 2019, proceeding the onset of COVID-19, to examine which aspects of culture ECOCs are expressing about their diversity and individual identities versus how they are communicating a 'European dimension'. The results showed that the formalisation of the bidding process and evaluation can limit the ability of ECOCs to engage in more diverse and localised forms of cultural expression and a series of five recommendations, based on this analysis, are included in this policy brief for consideration in future programme development actions.

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INTRODUCTION

The European City of Culture programme was launched by the Council of Ministers in 1985 with the aim to bring the citizens of European Union (i.e., the European Community at the time) closer together. Melina Mercouri, former Greek Minister of Culture, is quoted to have said on 22 November 1988):

Culture is the soul of society. Therefore, our foremost duty [as Ministers of Culture] is to look at the foundations and nature of this Community. This does not mean that we should impose our ideas. On the contrary, we must recognize the diversities and the differences amongst the people of Europe. The determining factor of a European identity lies precisely in respecting these diversities with the aim of creating a dialogue between the cultures of Europe. It is time for our voice to be heard as loud as that of the technocrats. Culture, art and creativity are not less important than technology, commerce and the economy (Poiein Kai Prattein, n.d.).

Mercouri emphasised recognising diversity, creating dialogue between cultures, and as filling a gap in European affairs which was prioritising a focus on the economy. Since then, the selection process of the ECOC cities has changed over the years and the emphasis has shifted away from creating a dialogue between diverse European countries towards a commodification culture and more recently, the title being treated as an economic opportunity for future investment into the creative industries. The significant changes in the ECOC programme since its inception are highlighted in Figure 1.

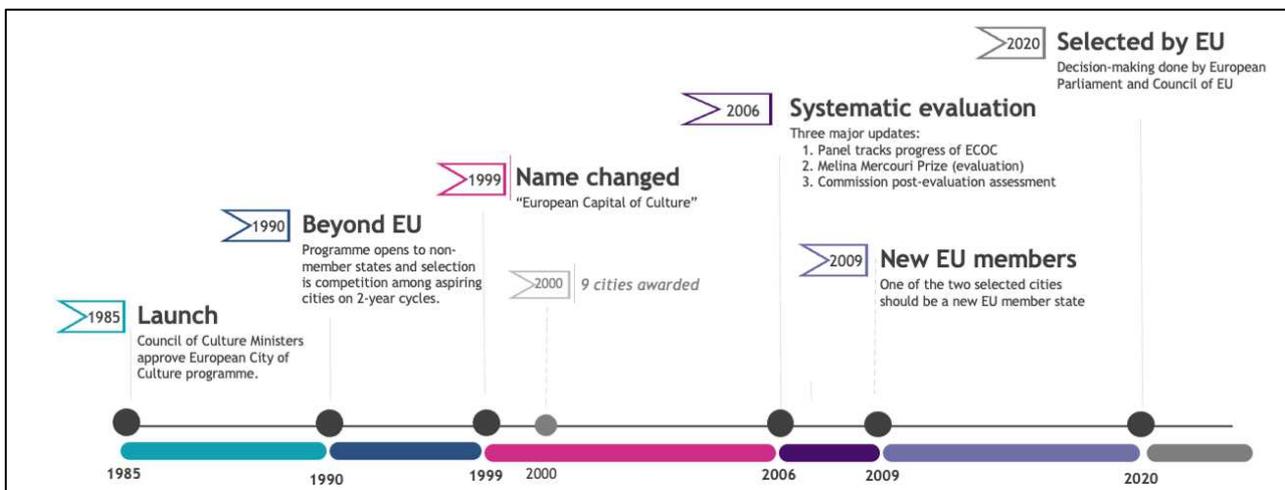


Figure 1. Significant regulation changes for ECOC selection process.

Previous formal evaluations of the ECOC initiative conducted on behalf of the European Commission have focused on how well the title city selection criteria were fulfilled while scholarly studies have mostly examined the impacts of the programmes from a single-city perspective and using quantitative and economic-focused approaches. The European Commission reports tend to focus on top-down versus bottom up cultural and development planning, governance issues, creative industries, and place branding (Ooi et al., 2014, p. 425). To date there are few studies on the long-term impact of the ECOC title, the specific contexts and agendas of the



participating cities, and on the “cultural industrialisation” that comes with globalisation (Ooi et al., 2014, p. 425-426). When it comes to the ECOC project, ultimately the “poetics and politics are intertwined” and both aspects need to be considered together (Ooi et al., 2014, p. 421). To build upon past studies and provide new insights into the expression of culture from a local as well as European perspective, a cross-comparative review was conducted with a focus on the overall aims of the ECOC programme, how it has evolved and how it has been carried out in practice. The following recommendations are based on this study of eight European Capitals of Culture title cities from 2015-2019 (see reference to associated research article for more details).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ECOC INITIATIVE

Recommendation 1: Re-focus the “European dimension” towards promoting and developing regional and international shared culture and heritage within the ECOC programme offerings to communicate “United in Diversity.”

The European Union’s policy rhetoric appeals to a “common cultural heritage” and a “European identity,” but these two concepts are not explicated, and this “vagueness and ambiguity also characterises the EU’s official slogan ‘United in Diversity’ (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 15). How the poetics of the EU’s slogan have manifested in the ECOC initiative over the years of its implementation can be summarised through a series of identified trends (see Figure 2). For example, in the early years of the initiative (1980s), the programmes focused on “high culture” as the designation of the cities holding the title were already renowned for their culture (e.g., Athens, Florence, Paris). In the 1990s, as inspired by the positive impacts of Glasgow1990, the bidding process shifted towards a focus on “cultural regeneration” (i.e., gentrification), which was closely followed by 2005’s emphasis on investing in urban infrastructures as seen in the examples of Sibiu2007 and Pécs2010 (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 489). The 2020-2032 ECOC bidding guide for cities emphasises that each city needs to consider its own local objectives while keeping in line with European standard criteria and EU level objectives so that they can also report a “legacy” after the ECOC year (European Commission 2018b, p. 4).

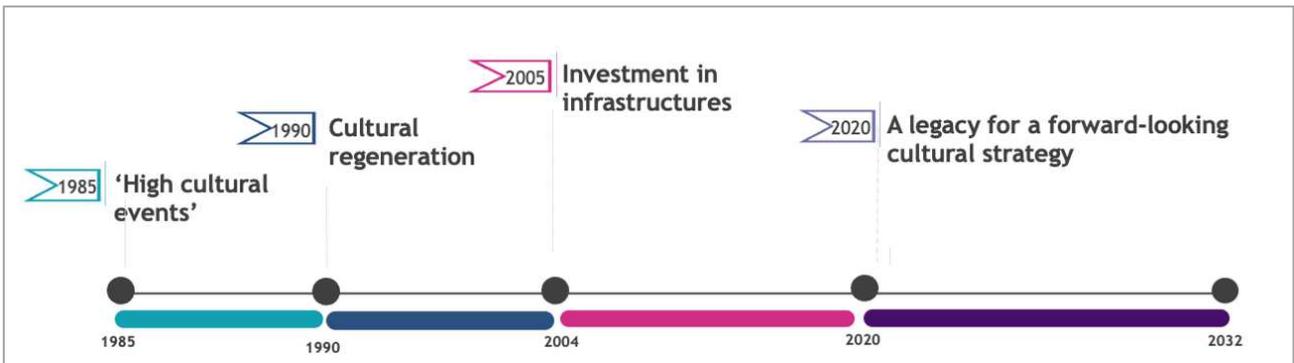


Figure 2. The foci of cultural identity in ECOC programme bids over the years.

To achieve a balance between local diversity and the European dimension, open calls from ECOC local organisers should include selection criteria that matches either a local or European target audience. For example, in their open calls for programme inclusion, Plovdiv2019 included selection criteria for the “European dimension” and choose to score submitted projects with local, national, or international collaborations higher (Fox et al., 2020, p. 62). Another option to help achieve a balance is to allocate two different funding streams, one that supports European themed projects and another call for local projects so that both unity and diversity are adequately covered in a strategically designed programme. This would still allow for the creative flexibility and interpretation of people (e.g., citizens) submitting to the call and should not place limitations on the nature of the cultural expression.

The case study analysis of ECOC title holders from 2015-2019, which also included a broader survey across other years, showed that the focus has moved towards developing the cultural industries (e.g., music, theatre, art exhibitions) and the continued commodification of culture (Basaraba, 2022). This has resulted in a lack of programming that features the individual cities’ history, intangible heritage such as, the traditions/customs of everyday residents, and how the local culture is similar or different from other places in Europe. This missing aspect of local diversity was demonstrated in the taglines or themes of the title holders between 2015-2019, which focused more on a European collective experience.

Unity-focused Taglines for ECOC 2015-2019	
“Growing Together”	Mons2015 (Belgium)
“ <i>Iepen Mienskip</i> ” / “Open Community”	Leeuwarden2018 (Netherlands)
“For a Together that Matters”	Plovdiv2019 (Bulgaria)
“Let’s Rethink”	Aarhus2017 (Denmark)
“Curiosity and Passion”	Umeå2014 (Sweden)

For example, the taglines in ECOC from 2015-2019 emphasised the concept of “unitedness” in the European Union’s tagline of “United in Diversity.” They were aspirational and relatively broad concepts that could theoretically apply to any city, country, or initiative because they rarely related to the history and culture of the location. An exception is Leeuwarden2018, which employed a local Dutch phrase and community philosophy that dualistically applies to the idea of a wider European community.



Culture is more than art and performance, it is the way citizens live and this is influenced by their history, location, and community interactions.

The ECOC bid books should include details on how their selected theme and programme activities will communicate both their local diversity and European shared cultural heritage. This would bring greater diversity and depth to the ECOC initiative beyond prioritising the entertainment value and economic growth (e.g., tourism and gentrification) to allow for a more bottom-up collective European understanding of the tagline “United in Diversity” through the selected cities. In other words, the “European dimension” should not skew the programme to become less locally diversified.

Recommendation 2: Develop a ECOC programme branding assets and guidelines that can be distributed to each title-holding city upon announcement of their success in the bidding process.

The overall visual brand of the ECOC programme is important for better understanding among locals and visitors. Aiello and Thurlow (2006) note that although there are no specific visual guidelines on what image-based concept needs to be produced, the ECOC requires the production of a logo for a city to “brand itself” while still being easily recognised under the ECOC candidature (p. 151). This still appears to be a vague process as exemplified by the open call for designing a city logo for NovaGorcia&Gorizia2025, which was recently re-opened after the submissions did not meet the provided guidelines (Euro-go, 2021). A previous study on the visual discourse of 30 ECOC title holder’s programmes from 2005 to 2011 showed that common visual motifs in the ECOC promotional material across cities and countries included the built environment, cityscapes with stock images of happy people and children who could be from almost anywhere in the world; maps to show the location of the city; visual representations of high culture by privileging the classical past and focusing of “snippets of buildings” in classical European architecture that are not recognisably specific to a certain local context (Aiello and Thurlow, 2006, p. 154-158). This was again confirmed by Lähdesmäki (2014) who asserted that some common ground for “European identity” has been identified as transnational heritage through urbanity, historical environments, and architectural styles (p. 64). Aiello and Thurlow (2006) also conclude that by comparing the ECOC branding to Euro banknotes imagery, the concept of “Europeanness is stylised and performatively reinscribed for a cross-cultural audience

through the repetition of generic cultural details or identity markers” (p. 160). Thus, Europeanness, or the “European dimension,” often appears symbolically and through infrastructure that lacks narratives of cultural diversity.

A visual analysis of the eight most-recently completed ECOC websites (between 2014-2019) showed a lot of similarity in the design choices for the city logos and websites considering that they are all from different regions of Europe and are not given specific brand guidelines from the European Commission—other than they must create a logo (Basaraba, 2022). The city logos were either red, EU blue, or multicoloured and they used similar shapes. The design similarities are most evident in the Aarhus2017 and Plovdiv2019 websites, which are nearly indistinguishable when viewed side-by-side (see Basaraba, 2022). The level of similarity in the website design appeals to the European dimension, but again makes the individuality and diversity of the cities fade into the background as was also demonstrated through the subject matter of the selected photographs appearing in black and white with blue overlays on both websites. Examining the visual identity of the ECOCs between 2014-2019 also revealed inconsistency in terms of a common European Capital of Culture branding. For example, in the individual ECOC logos, four included the subtext “European Capital of Culture,” one had “capital of culture,” and three did not include any reference to it being an ECOC in the logo. This indicates that the EC did not require the use of the subtext in the logo. On a related note, the official European Capital of Culture initiative logo includes the European Union flag. However, the initiative is not exclusive to European Union members. The title has been awarded to six cities (including up to the year 2033) that are affiliated countries (e.g., EU candidates or part of the European Economic Area) rather than full members of the EU. Since the initiative’s logo is tied to the EU, it can cause confusion among EU, EEA, and non-EU citizens as to what is considered part of Europe as a geographic continent, the European Union, or the European Economic Area. It could lead some to question why the 1.5 million Melina Mercouri Prize¹ (funded by the EU Creative Europe Programme) is awarded outside EU member states and thus, could cause some political discord.

It is recommended that the EC creates a new ECOC logo. The logo could either not feature the EU flag, considering that the programme does not pertain exclusively to EU member states, or it could include clarifying subtext such as “co-funded by the European Capital of Culture Programme” with the EU flag symbol to denote those cities that are awarded the Melina Mercouri Prize. This would create a more consistent visual identity and branding of ECOC winners in the future and cover an instance where a ECOC title holder is not awarded the Melina Mercouri Prize. Secondly, if the “European dimension” is to be communicated more consistently from a visual branding perspective, the EC could develop a “press/marketing” kit of assets including the respective EU sponsorship logos and another visual symbol or banner with the words “European Capital of Culture” that each city can adapt into their custom city logo and marketing style. This would follow corporate branding best practices while allowing each city the opportunity to be diverse and clearly signifying to citizens and visitors that it is part of the ECOC initiative or/and been awarded the Melina Mercouri Prize.

¹ It is noted that the Melina Mercouri Prize awarded by the European Commission for the ECOC programme is different than the similarly named UNESCO-Greece Melina Mercouri International Prize (since 1997), which is awarded by UNESCO for contributions towards the safeguarding and management of cultural landscapes.



Recommendation 3: As part of the legacy, create a digital archive of the ECOC title website, programme, and produced marketing materials.

The level of self-reporting and evaluation varies greatly between title holding cities. There was an inconsistent process for documentation and archiving for the eight ECOC examined between 2015-2019 (Basaraba, 2022). The different document types for each ECOC were located on various websites including the ECOC event website, the city's local tourism website, the European Commission ECOC webpage, the European Commission Publications repository, and the ISSUU publishing website. For example, the Aarhus2017 website was the only city, of the eight examined in an in-depth study of recent winners, that had the full programme archived as individual webpages. Umeå2014 neither had an archived website nor a PDF copy of the programme easily searchable online (perhaps because it was the oldest case study in this sample). However, a copy of the Umeå2014 PDF programme was found on the ISSUU website, which was also used by Mons2015, Wrocław2016, and Leeuwarden2018. ISSUU Inc is an electronic publishing platform founded in 2004 by a Danish start-up (which moved to the USA in 2013) and it was a popular method of publishing PDFs online at a time when publishers did not want to risk that a document would be copied, downloaded, or otherwise tampered with. Since the ECOC programmes were not downloadable and instead hosted on a USA-based website in a small iFrame, the documents were difficult and time consuming to analyse. It highlighted the importance and need for each ECOC to self-host their own archived documents for public access and for the EC to keep copies of the ECOC programmes in PDF in their own digital archives, particularly for reporting, legacy, and future analyses, and developmental reasons. This is particularly true if the ISSUU company is for some reason discontinued in the future and online publications become no longer available. In terms of good practice on an individual city level, both Mons2015 and Leeuwarden2018, although did not keep their ECOC title year branded website, they actively created newly designed legacy websites that continue to build cultural programmes and they include summaries from the ECOC title year. For instance, the separate Leeuwarden2018 legacy website (<https://arcadia.frl/>) includes an archive of the ECOC event, including a PDF copy of the bid book, curated event highlight descriptions that have been edited into past tense, and information of the “legacy” dated to 2028, which includes information about upcoming cultural programming.

The ECOC committee should begin archiving the ECOC title websites, programmes, and impact reports in a publicly accessible digital archive. This would result in a more complete record of the programme being available for analysis and learning for future event creators and could assist future city applicants so they can learn from best practices and not repeat aspects of the programmes that were less successful in previous years. A more standardised approach to archiving of these mega events by the EC would also be helpful for post-event evaluations and cross-country analyses by scholars and policy makers. This digital archive is part of the legacy and it could be housed within the EC databases or in a subsection of the ECOC area on the EC's website. Another option would be to partner with other European initiatives, such as the Europeana portal, The Time Machine Europe project, and/or national libraries or archives.

Recommendation 4: Evaluate the sociocultural impact of the title year on locals and visitors through qualitative interviews rather than focusing on economic metrics.

The European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) initiative has four main objectives which are to “highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, celebrate the cultural features Europeans share, increase European citizens’ sense of belonging to a common cultural area, and foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities” (ECOC, 2021). These four objectives are evaluated by the European Commission (since 2007) according to 14 “core result indicators” of which 11 are quantitative measures (e.g., metrics on events, attendance, economic impact, etc.) and three are qualitative (e.g., sustained partnerships, long-term strategy for cultural development, and awareness among residents of the ECOC) (Fox and Rampton, 2019, p. 27-30). The question of balancing the local diversity and unitedness of the European dimension within the EC eligibility and evaluation criteria all impact the ECOC's programme design, visual communications, and the citizens’ and visitors’ experiences. The EC monitoring reports cover the governance, programme development which includes the European and citizen dimensions, infrastructure projects, logo, inclusion of civil society, and self-monitoring reports/legacy (Fox & Rampton, 2019, p. 23-24).

Referring to the programme PDFs and the EC reports, it is difficult to find the most accurate total number of events hosted throughout the duration of the designated year of culture especially because some ECOCs differentiated between events, projects, and other activity categorisations. Furthermore, some ECOCs do not include all events and activities in the published PDF programmes and thus, a much lower number of events were coded by type compared to the number of total events reportedly held (see Figure 3).

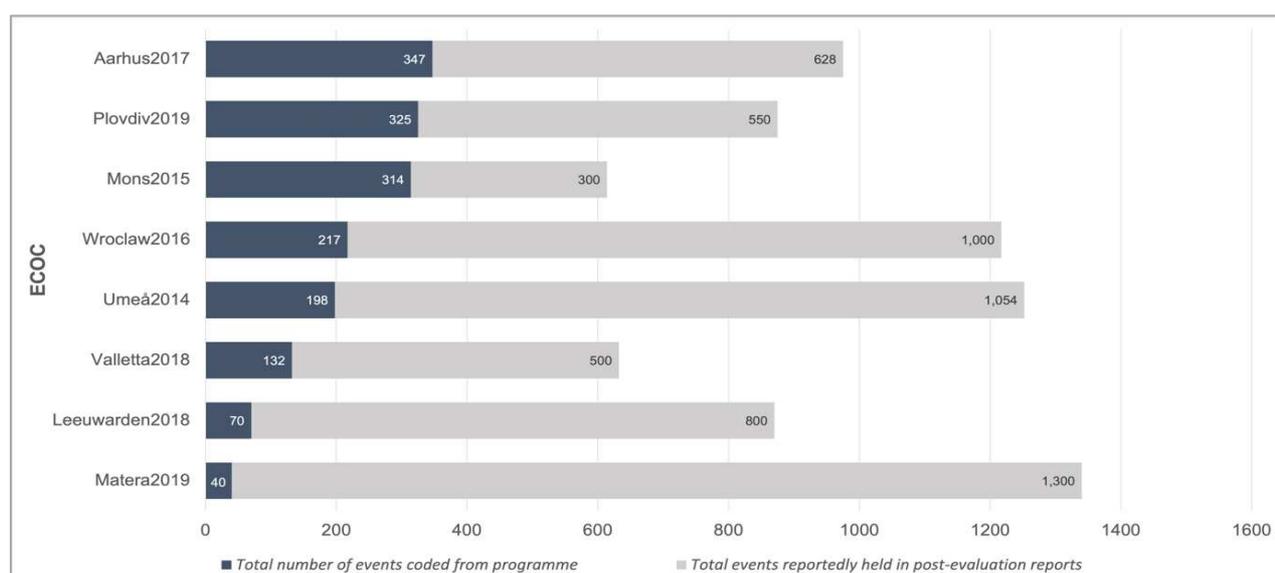


Figure 3. Number of events coded for each ECOC as sourced from publicly available programme information and post-evaluation reports (Basaraba, 2022).

This discrepancy is notable from a programme evaluation standpoint. Some EC Ex-post evaluation reports did state that the final evaluations have been conducted before the completion of the programme year (and they recommend that ECOC conduct self-evaluations for better accuracy). This discrepancy leads to difficulty in getting a full understanding of the impact and results. An in-depth examination of the number and nature of events showed vast differences between how each city adopts the title (Basaraba, 2022). The EC took the decision in 2014 that ECOCs from 2020-2033 must carry out their own evaluations of the title-years' results that speak to the Commission's common guidelines and indicators and these reports are due to be published on the Commission's website (European Commission, 2018b). The aim of this self-evaluation mandate is to address some of the challenges mentioned throughout this case study in terms of cross-city comparison and "especially its medium-to-long term cultural, social and economic legacy in host cities" (European Commission, 2018b, p. 5). If the original intent of the ECOC programme was to showcase the diversity of Europe, create dialogue, and referring to Mercuri's (1983) words, express that "culture, art and creativity are not less important than technology, commerce and the

economy,” then it is contrary that the required legacy reporting focuses on a plan for continued economic investment and commercialisation of cultural events.

To assist with the ECOC evaluation and programming development, it recommended that ECOC programmes include a categorisation of the “types” of events (e.g., festival) and “subject” of events (e.g., contemporary art) so that members of the public, academics and analysts can more easily get a quantitative and qualitative understanding of the programme design. High-level numbers and broad marketing descriptions of the events are good for attracting visitors and participation but less useful for tangible reporting. It is also suggested that winning cities are encouraged, or possibly even be required, to allocate funding for social scientists within local universities to conduct self-evaluation, post-event evaluation reports, and reflections for legacy initiatives. The results of evaluations conducted by local social scientists could later be used and taken a step further for cross-country comparisons at the wider ECOC initiative level to examine how or whether the main objectives are being achieved and this can inform future policy changes to the initiative as needed.

Recommendation 5: Reconsider pre-selecting nations for a particular year due to potential misalignment with current political-economic situations and allow cities from European regions to bid when it fits with locally driven initiatives.

A previous study, conducted on behalf of the European Commission covering the ECOC awarded between 1995-2004 showed that the ECOC programme is a powerful tool for city change, but that the cultural dimension had been “overshadowed by political ambitions and other non-cultural interests” which raised questions about the sustainability of impact (Palmer/Rae Associates, 2004, p. 25). This report led to the European Commission’s increased focus on the “legacy” of the ECOC after the city’s respective designated year. Subsequently, the recent study (Basaraba, 2022) closely examined the ECOC the programmes that were completed between 2014-2019 to identify any patterns in the political-economic status among European regions for the title holding cities and countries. Four high-level data sources were examined namely, the complete list of awarded European Capitals of Culture from 1988-2033 (with some cities still to be announced at the time of the research was conducted in 2021); the gross domestic product per capita (GDPp/c), which serves as a snapshot of the average level of development of European countries; the available statistics on European countries’ investment into cultural services; and the population of European countries (see Table 1). Four of the five countries that have received the highest number of European Capitals of Culture awards correlate with the most highly populated European countries (Germany, France, Italy, and Spain), with Belgium being an outlier in terms of its lower population size. However, Belgium is one of the top eight wealthiest countries in Europe and it is also the “capital” of the European Union.



Table 1. A general cross-comparison of EU Eurostat metrics and ECOC winning countries (ordered high at top to lower at the bottom).

RANKED ORDER (HIGH TO LOW)	ECOC TITLE HOLDER	MOST TOURISTS²	POPULATION	HIGHEST GDP/C	INVESTING IN CULTURAL SERVICES³
1	Spain	Spain	Turkey	Luxembourg	Estonia
2	Italy	Italy	Germany	Ireland	Latvia
3	France	France	France	Denmark	Hungary
4	Belgium	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Lithuania
5	Germany	Austria	Spain	Austria	Malta
6	Greece	Germany	Poland	Sweden	Poland
7	Netherlands	Croatia	Romania	Germany	Czech Republic
8 ⁴	Portugal	Netherlands	Netherlands	Belgium	Croatia

Non-EU members have won ECOC five times including, Turkey (Istanbul, 2010), Serbia (Novi Sad, 2022), and Norway, which has three title cities (Bergen, 2000; Stavanger, 2008; Bodo, 2024). Comparatively, based on these data, two countries that may be considered underrepresented in the ECOC designations list and that could potentially benefit most from winning the title are Poland (which has a large population) and Hungary (which has won the ECOC twice), but both are some of the highest spending countries on cultural services. Both countries also have lower GDPp/c when comparing across-the-broad-averages to other EU member states, and thus would arguably benefit from the by-product of city’s economic developments that often result from holding a ECOC

² Data retrieved from: “Nights spent by international guests at tourist accommodation establishments, 2019” (Eurostat) https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tourism_statistics

³ Share of general government expenditure on cultural services, broadcasting, and publishing services, 2019. *Eurostat*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Culture_statistics_-_government_expenditure_on_cultural%2C_broadcasting_and_publishing_services&oldid=524139&fbclid=IwAR1-0Oc11gyCIB7cPKArrvLDEaC766kpdDWX9R2Kmd9SyoR_ggSPyOYKoQ

⁴ The table shows the top eight rather than top 10 because eight countries have received the most EEC awards.

title. A few common notes among EC post-evaluation reports for the eight case studies were that local organisers often lacked the skills and experience to host large-scale events, which led to delays and challenges with event logistics and financial practicalities. Secondly, the change in local governments and shifts in political ideologies results in major challenges, delays, and significant changes to the ECOC initiative implementation. Previously published literature and the ECOC Ex-post Evaluation Reports have placed more emphasis on the “development of cities” portion of the initiative (Basaraba, 2022). This is also true considering the new focus on “legacy” of the annual events. Therefore, it is recommended that the ECOC selection process be modified from the current method of pre-selecting countries to be eligible to submit bids in specific years to a process of allowing two or more countries within a larger region to submit a bid to host the title in a year that makes sense for the local culture (e.g., important anniversaries or milestones), and when their political and economic situations are stable enough so that issues with programme implantation are not negatively impacted by these factors.

SUMMARY

Recommendations in brief

1. Re-focus the ‘European dimension’ on shared culture and heritage.
2. Develop ECOC branding assets and guidelines that cities can adapt to their theme.
3. Create a comprehensive digital archive of the ECOC title programmes and reports.
4. Financially support or mandate local social scientists to conduct evaluation reports focused on the sociocultural impact of the title year.
5. Re-consider preselecting eligible countries in specific years to allow for bidding flexibility that align with local political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Dr Nicole Basaraba was a Postdoctoral Researcher at Studio Europa Maastricht, Maastricht University, the Netherlands from 2021-2022. Read more of her publications via her ORCID: 0000-0003-1753-9160.



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