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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Ex Post evaluation of the 2019 European Capitals of Culture (Plovdiv and Matera)

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is presented in accordance with Article 12 of Decision No 1622/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October 2006 establishing a Community Action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2007 to 2019¹ (here after, the Decision), which provides that the Commission ensures each year an external and independent evaluation of the results of the European Capital of Culture event of the previous year² and reports on that evaluation to the relevant EU Institutions and bodies.

The findings and methodology of the ex post evaluation are presented more comprehensively in the accompanying Commission staff working-document.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE ACTION

2.1. The EU Action for the European Capital of Culture (ECOC)

Since the launch – at intergovernmental level – of the European City of Culture in 1985³, the scheme developed into a fully-fledged EU Action in 1999⁴. It is currently governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU⁵, but cities which were designated as ECOC for the years up to 2019 are regulated by Decision No 1622/2006/EC.

The ECOC Action is designed to highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe and the features they share, thereby encouraging a greater mutual understanding among European citizens. It is also meant to stimulate a long-term culture-based development of cities. In achieving these objectives, the ECOC Action is intended to help host cities to enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of their cultural offer, widen participation in culture among their residents, strengthen the capacity of their cultural sector and raise their international profile.

2.2. The selection and monitoring of the ECOC 2019

In accordance with the Decision, Bulgaria and Italy were the two Member States entitled to host an ECOC in 2019.

In accordance with Decision No 1622/2006/EC, the selection process starts at least six years ahead of the ECOC title-year, with the relevant authorities in the Member States concerned (i.e. their respective Ministries of Culture) publishing a call for applications from interested cities in their country. The selection is in two phases: shortlisting and final recommendation,

¹ OJ L 304 of 3.11.2006, p. 1.

² Full text of the evaluation at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e501d588-3a96-11eb-b27b-01aa75ed71a1>.

³ Resolution of the Ministers responsible for Cultural Affairs, meeting within the Council, of 13 June 1985 concerning the annual event 'European City of Culture' (85/C 153/02).

⁴ Decision No 1419/1999/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 May 1999 establishing a Community Action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2005 to 2019 (OJ L 166, 1.7.1999, p.1). That Decision was amended by Decision 649/2005/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (OJ L 117, 4.5.2005).

⁵ Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 establishing a Union Action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033 (OJ L 132, 3.5.2014).

respectively five and four years in advance of the title year. A panel of thirteen members – six of whom nominated by the Member State concerned and the other seven by European Union institutions and bodies – assesses the bids submitted by candidate cities on the basis of the objectives and criteria laid down in the Decision.

In Italy, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism issued the call in November 2012. It received a record number of 21 applications by the deadline of 20 September 2013, which illustrates the high popularity and strong attractiveness of the ECOC title in the country. At the pre-selection meeting in November 2013, the panel recommended the ministry to invite six cities to the final stage: Cagliari, Lecce, Matera, Perugia, Ravenna and Siena. Finally, in October 2014, the panel recommended that Matera be awarded the ECOC 2019 title in Italy⁶.

In Bulgaria, the Ministry of Culture published the call in December 2012, and eight cities entered the competition by the deadline of 18 October 2013. At the pre-selection meeting in December 2013, four of them were short-listed: Plovdiv, Sofia, Varna and Veliko Tarnovo. In September 2014, the panel recommended that Plovdiv become the first city in Bulgaria to get the ECOC title.

The Council of the European Union formally designated Matera and Plovdiv as ECOC 2019 in May 2015⁷.

Subsequently, both cities were subjected to monitoring arrangements: under the auspices of the Commission, the aim of such arrangements was for a panel consisting of the seven independent experts appointed by the EU institutions and bodies to check on the cities' progress, provide them with guidance on implementation and ensure compliance with the programme and commitments on the basis of which they had been selected. Representatives of Matera and Plovdiv attended two formal monitoring meetings, in October 2016 and April 2018. Upon completion of the monitoring process, the panel made a positive recommendation to the Commission to award a €1.5 million prize in honour of Melina Mercouri to each of the two cities. The prize – funded under the Creative Europe programme⁸ – was paid to the two ECOC in the autumn of 2018.

2.3. The themes and focus of the two ECOC 2019

Matera is a relatively small city of 60,000 inhabitants located in the Basilicata region of Southern Italy. It is the capital of the Province of Matera and is known as the “Città Sotterranea” (the Underground City). Today, Matera is known worldwide for its historical centre, known as “I Sassi”, which became a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1993. Whilst affected by high levels of poverty and infant mortality rates until the 1950s, Matera is also a good example of urban rebirth and regeneration, which started in the 1960s and have ultimately turned the city into a regional capital for leisure and culture and a destination for regional visitors.

Matera's ECOC application highlighted the importance of the cultural renovation process, not only for Matera, but for the entire South of Italy, in a period characterised by an economic and social decline. Its cultural programme was named “Open Future” and aimed to “strengthen

⁶ All panel's pre-selection, selection and monitoring reports are available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/matera-and-plovdiv>

⁷ Council Decision (EU) 2015/809 of 19 May 2015 designating the European Capitals of Culture for the year 2019 in Bulgaria and Italy, at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32015D0809>

⁸ Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2014 to 2020) and repealing Decisions No 1718/2006/EC, No 1855/2006/EC and No 1041/2009/EC (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013).

broad ranging, open and diversified citizenship; to enhance international relations and above all to transform Matera into the most important platform of open culture in Southern Europe”.

Plovdiv is the second largest city in Bulgaria, with around 347,000 inhabitants. It is Southern Bulgaria’s cultural and business centre. The city is unique by its 8,000-year long history and is one of the oldest, still-inhabited cities in the world. It boasts numerous remains from antiquity and more than 200 archaeological sites as well as a very vibrant cultural scene. Economically, it is among the fastest developing cities in Bulgaria, with traditions in manufacturing, commerce, transport, communications and tourism.

The city also stands out with its multi-ethnic population, being a home for Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Jews and Roma people. This aspect of the city context became a fundamental part of the ECOC application and overall programme and is where some of the main themes and projects were focused. The diversity of Plovdiv was also reflected in its ECOC motto, “Together”, inspired by the co-existence of different ethnic minorities, social groups and religious communities.

3. EVALUATION

3.1. The terms of the evaluation

Based on the external and independent support study mentioned in the introduction (see footnote 2), the evaluation explores the implementation and delivery of the two ECOC 2019 programmes throughout their lifecycle, from their early inception through to sustainability and legacy considerations.

Specifically, it assesses the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the two ECOC 2019. It also examines the EU added value and the coherence and complementarity of the ECOC Action in 2019 to other EU initiatives. Finally, it draws conclusions emerging from the two experiences.

3.2. Methodology and limitations of the approach chosen

The evaluation and its methodology were designed to satisfy the requirements of the Decision, and to contribute to a more detailed understanding of the performance and achievements of the ECOC Action. In particular, it constitutes a valuable opportunity to critically reconsider the past year in order to highlight lessons and recommendations for reshaping current wisdom and insights in the light of the new experiences of the host cities.

As for all previous evaluations, the intervention logic is based on a hierarchy of objectives corresponding to the Decision.

In order for results to be comparable, the methodology for this evaluation followed the approach for evidence gathering and analysis adopted in all previous assessments of the ECOC Action. However, due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the first half of 2020, the methodology had to be slightly revised, as initially planned visits to both cities could not take place and face-to-face interviews were replaced by remote ones and online meetings with stakeholders.

The evaluation was grounded in two types of data and respective sources:

- Primary data included either data provided by each ECOC such as interviews and online questionnaires; interviews in particular sought to gain a variety of perspectives on each ECOC, including those of the management teams, decision-makers, key cultural operators, a range of partners involved in the delivery of the programme and a sample of organisations either leading or participating in the actual projects;

- Secondary data sources encompassed EU policy and legislative documents, academic research on ECOC and the role of culture in cities development, the two ECOC 2019 original bids, internal reports linked to the application processes, monitoring and evaluation reports, studies and annual reports produced or commissioned by the ECOC, events programmes, promotional materials and websites, as well as key statistical data collected by the two cities on budgets and spend details, projects numbers and types, participation levels and audience figures, outputs and results;
- The evaluation does not include a wider public consultation. As explained in the corresponding roadmap⁹, the Action is considered to be local, and international participation is scattered within and outside Europe and is difficult to reach.

As was the case with all previous ex-post ECOC evaluations¹⁰, the Commission maintains that the methodology chosen is appropriate to provide a reasonably solid basis on which sensible conclusions may be inferred regarding the ECOC performance.

However, as was already highlighted in all reports of previous years, the lack of baseline data to be integrated in a comparative study of the city prior to the win of the title, at the start of title-year and after the implementation of the ECOC year continue to be a limitation. These data are crucial to get a balanced perspective, supported by a cogent and ample data basis, of the actual impact of the ECOC Action on a city.

However the budget allocated to the evaluation work (approximately 70 000 € each year) – which is proportionate to the modest level of EU funding directly provided by the EU to each ECOC host (€1.5m Melina Mercouri Prize) – doesn't make it possible to have a before ('baseline') study and an after-picture ('ex-post') study. An additional consequence of the modest budget is that the primary evidence data gathering tends to be more of qualitative than quantitative nature; while qualitative data still holds a great importance in the evaluation, the lack of diversity of data sources translates into a lesser dependability, for instance, in the process of proving the objective outcomes and impacts of ECOC on widening participation in culture.

Therefore, the report and its conclusions are substantiated by an ample basis of qualitative data (e.g. the views of various types of stakeholders) more than by a comprehensive quantitative set of data.

The Commission can only reiterate in this report what it repeatedly expressed in previous yearly reports on ECOC ex post evaluations since 2007, i.e. that it is fully aware of – and accepts – those limitations, which had also been clearly identified and communicated in a staff working document accompanying the proposal for a new Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Union Action for the ECOC for the years 2020 to 2033 and repealing Decision No 1622/2006/EC¹¹.

As mentioned in its previous reports, with regard to this difficulty, this proposal and the Decision ultimately adopted by the European Parliament and the Council¹² foresee that the designated cities themselves – which are the main funders and beneficiaries of the ECOC Action and better positioned to have baseline data and gather primary data on the impact of the title – become the main implementers of the evaluation process. To help cities in this

⁹ See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2019-3143701_en.

¹⁰ This is the 12th yearly ex post evaluations in as many years.

¹¹ See SWD (2012) 226 final, point 2.4.4.

¹² Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, see footnote n° 5.

exercise, the Commission published guidelines¹³, which underline the importance of carrying longitudinal evaluations and the need for baselines to measure impact.

This new obligation put on the ECOC-cities – instead of the Commission – to perform an ex post evaluation of their title-year will apply only from the 2020 titles. On top of these evaluations carried out directly by the title-holders, the Commission will, however, also carry out an overall evaluation encompassing several ECOC years, enabling to better measure the long-term impact of the ECOC Action, as indicated in Decision No 445/2014/EU.

It is also worth underlining that the outcomes of the local research activities commissioned by both Plovdiv and Matera fed into the Commission's evaluation whenever possible.

In conclusion, despite the deficiency of quantitative data and other independent evidence, the Commission finds a sufficient solidity in the evidence gathered to support the evaluation and shares its overall assessment and deductions, which are considered to provide a generally true and informed picture of the ECOC 2019.

4. MAIN FINDINGS

4.1. Relevance

According to the findings of the evaluation, the objectives of both 2019 ECOC cities were relevant to the objectives of the ECOC Action, as set out in Decision No 1622/2006/EC.

The programme of both Matera 2019 and Plovdiv 2019 promoted cultural diversity and a greater understanding among European citizens, especially in terms of process, but also in terms of content.

In Matera, this was done through the involvement of almost 200 international artists, the implementation of over 1,000 international mobility programmes, artistic residencies, the integration of international events into the programme etc.. The programme also reached its initial objectives, as expressed in the initial application, in radically changing Matera's approach to culture and its role in the national and European cultural scene and (at least partially) driving a cultural renovation process through the active involvement of local cultural operators and citizens (see 4.3).

As far as Plovdiv is concerned, over 130 partnerships with creative organisations from Europe were established and a total of 80 events had a cross-border dimension in 2019, which is four times higher than the number of such events during the baseline year 2017. Plovdiv reached its goals to significantly diversify its cultural offer through such a stronger presence of European and international artists, develop cultural capacity (see 4.3) and – to a lesser degree – better include the Roma community (an important proportion of Plovdiv population) in the city's cultural life despite some encouraging results (see accompanying staff-working document).

4.2. Efficiency

Overall, the available evidence suggests that ECOC remains an efficient EU Action providing good levels of returns at EU level for a relatively modest EU investment: the awarding of the title itself has a substantial leverage effect on the amount of funding that host cities dedicate to designing and delivering the ECOC cultural programme, and it is a significant generator of interest and financing from a broad array of stakeholders, including local, regional and national authorities and – to a lesser degree with the 2019 hosting cities – private contributors. Moreover, the absolute value of the Melina Mercouri Prize, which is the only direct monetary

¹³ See: <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/sites/default/files/2021-04/ecoc-guidelines-for-cities-own-evaluations-2020-2033.pdf>

contribution that host cities receive from the European Union, is modest (€1,5m per ECOC) in comparison to the overall costs of an ECOC: the operating expenditure of the ECOC 2019 were approximately of €54.8m for Matera and €10.0m for Plovdiv.

At city level, the evaluation concludes that both Matera and Plovdiv faced difficulties with management arrangements in the preparation period. On a positive side, there was a clear distinction of roles and responsibilities within the teams of both foundations in charge of the implementation of the ECOC project. This ensured a mostly smooth delivery of the ECOC programmes in the title year once the initial difficulties had been overcome. Matera raised sufficient funds to implement a sizeable cultural programme in line with its initial forecast (€54.8m against €52.3m in its application). The situation was more challenging in Plovdiv, where the overall budget (covering operating and infrastructure) was lower than the one proposed in the application, due in particular to lower than expected contributions from the private and the City, but the budget was nonetheless sufficient to carry out an ambitious programme that achieved positive impacts related to tourism and economic growth in the city (see below).

4.3. Effectiveness

The evaluation comes to the conclusion that the two 2019 ECOC made a significant contribution to the achievement of the Decision's objectives.

Both presented cultural programmes that were more extensive, diverse, innovative and international compared to the cultural offer in previous years.

Both helped widen access to and participation in culture. In Matera, the initial goal, which was to ensure that a large share of the high number of events organised in 2019 were realised with Matera's citizens, was achieved. The overall audience is estimated at 500,000 people. But, more importantly, around 60,000 citizens were involved in the co-creation process and capacity-building programme put in place by the Foundation. In Plovdiv, stimulating access to and participation in cultural events was also a strong element of the ECOC project, and the cultural programme succeeded in attracting 1,528,432 people, including young people from deprived neighbourhoods and elderly people from smaller towns and villages in the wider Plovdiv region.

Both ECOC helped strengthen the cultural capacity of their cultural and creative sectors. This was done through an improved cultural infrastructure (mapping of about 400 venues and spaces that could be used for cultural events in Matera) or dedicated capacity-building programmes (4,900 participants took place in the multi-annual educational platform run by the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation).

Moreover, the ECOC raised the international profile of both cities. In Plovdiv, about 9% of people attending ECOC related events were international visitors. Matera 2019 and its cultural programme was discussed in almost 58,000 articles in national and international newspapers and journals and in approximately 1,300 radio and TV reports.

Positive impacts are expected with regard to the legacy of the ECOC in both cities, as significant efforts were made to keep the momentum going after 2019, though plans have been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020.

4.4. Coherence

The ECOC Action is coherent and complementary to the EU Creative Europe Programme, in that it promotes the objectives of Creative Europe and is distinct from the other activities supported by the programme. As an example, Plovdiv was part of a capacity-building project funded under Creative Europe, the European Academy of Outdoor Arts School of Spectacle,

aiming to give creative practitioners a better understanding of the possibilities of outdoor art celebrations. The ECOC Action is also coherent with and complementary to the European Cohesion Policy Funds. As an illustration, in cooperation with Leeuwarden (ECOC 2018), Aarhus (ECOC 2017) and other European partners, Matera implemented the ‘Night Light’ Interreg project, aiming at bringing together key lessons and practices experienced in different European contexts related to reducing light pollution.

4.5. EU added value

As already mentioned and illustrated above, the ECOC Action has achieved an impact that would not have arisen through the actions of Member States alone.

The evidence from both cities shows that the ECOC provides titleholders with the impetus to implement more extensive cultural programmes than they would otherwise do (1,300 events and projects implemented in Matera 2019, 80% of which consisting in original creations; 513 cultural events in Plovdiv, some of them being ambitious productions that were praised by audiences and critics alike). The title also helps them attract resources from the public purse (but to quite a lesser degree from the private sector) (see 4.2) and increase their international profile (see 4.3). The European Commission plays a key role in promoting the ECOC Action via publications, events and the Europa website, albeit with relatively limited resources. These activities support the ECOCs’ own promotional activities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Commission concludes from the evaluation that the ECOC Action remains relevant at EU level as well as greatly valuable for host cities, and that it generates extensive cultural programmes with positive outputs and impacts that cannot, however, be fully assessed at the current evaluation stage, so shortly after the end of the ECOC year. The intention of the Commission is to assess these outputs and impacts in a broader perspective at a later stage, within the framework of the long-term evaluation it will conduct in 2024, as specified in Article 16 of Decision 445/2014/EU.

Another conclusion is that the programmes implemented by the two 2019 title-holders were consistent with the objectives of the ECOC Action. They reflected its European dimension, in particular through the connections made at European and international levels. Furthermore, they involved local residents and stakeholders while widening access to and participation in culture. They also helped strengthen the cultural capacity of the local cultural and creative sectors.

These findings confirm those that emerged from all previous ECOC evaluations, i.e. that ECOC title-holders carry out cultural programmes that are more extensive and innovative than the cities’ usual annual cultural offer, with a strong European dimension and involving local citizens as well as international visitors, in line with the objectives of the Treaty and the ECOC Action.

After twelve years of similar yearly ex post evaluations covering the ECOC titles 2007 to 2019, the evaluator produced a very limited number of recommendations (i.e., just five). Only three of them are addressed to the Commission. The evaluator recommends that the Commission consider placing stronger emphasis on the sustainability aspect of the action and, in particular, on the capacity building of cultural operators in this respect. Sustainability is an ongoing concern, which is to a great extent already reflected in Decision No 445/2014/EU. The latter makes it an obligation for bidding cities to have in place, at the time of their application, a cultural strategy that covers their ECOC project and includes plans for sustaining the cultural activities beyond the title-year. The bidding cities’ plans to

strengthen the capacity of their cultural and creative sectors is also a criterion for the ward of the ECOC title.

In line with another recommendation of the evaluator, the Commission, with the help of the ECOC Expert panel, has already produced a clear and harmonised minimum set of Key Performance Indicators that the title cities can use to report on their performance. The guidelines are mentioned in the questionnaire bidding cities have to fill in when bidding for the title.

In line with the third recommendation addressed by the evaluator to the Commission, the Commission will continue inviting the title cities to collaborate in the development of a common international communication campaign to increase efficiency.

Finally, as suggested by the evaluator in relation with national authorities, the Commission will include in the detailed guidelines it provides these authorities to help them in administering their respective competitions, an invitation to consider actions to facilitate coordination with stakeholders and authorities at local, regional and national levels and to consider facilitating opportunities for current or potential applicant cities to exchange experience in mobilising financial resources and attracting private sponsorship for their ECOC.