Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'the future of the European Capital of Culture'

(2012/C 113/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

— acknowledges that the ECOC is a valuable event that highlights the wealth, diversity and common aspects of European cultures, noting that the ECOC programme has made a special contribution to the emergence of a European identity during a period of rapid cultural growth for the European Union;

— points out that the growing prestige of the title has also given culture an important place on the political agenda of the Member States, regions and cities;

— reaffirms its belief that the concept of intercultural dialogue, allied with social and territorial cohesion, can help to instil the basic values of private, social and civic life, such as solidarity, responsibility, tolerance, respect; it can also foster the ability to communicate between individuals and groups with a different cultural background and help them live together in solidarity;

— notes that cities which have been awarded the title ECOC have seen their cultural sector significantly strengthened and a sustained increase in cultural participation, particularly among young people;

— stresses that the ECOC needs to be a process in which local audiences are developed through educational programmes, participatory actions and raised awareness on local and European issues.

Rapporteur Anton ROMBOUTS (NL/EPP), Mayor of 's-Hertogenbosch

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General context

1. welcomes the fact that the Commission is working on a new legal framework for the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) and has held an online consultation and public meeting in 2010-2011. Reiterates its commitment to contribute to the discussion exercise, as stated in the opinion on the *Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Decision 1419/1999/EC establishing a Community action for the "European Capital of Culture" event for the years 2005 to 2019* ([1]);

2. stresses the importance of continuing the ECOC programme beyond 2019;

3. acknowledges that the ECOC is a valuable event that highlights the wealth, diversity and common aspects of European cultures, noting that the ECOC programme has made a special contribution to the emergence of a European identity during a period of rapid cultural growth for the European Union;

4. points out that the growing prestige of the title has also given culture an important place on the political agenda of the Member States, regions and cities. Furthermore, research and investment in culture is an important means of ensuring prosperity and social cohesion in cities and regions as well as at national and European level;

5. considers that giving young people the opportunity to take part in a variety of cultural events broadens their horizons and helps them to overcome their prejudices and fear of what is foreign and unknown to them, thus contributing to multicultural dialogue;

6. reaffirms its belief that the concept of intercultural dialogue, allied with social and territorial cohesion, can help to instil the basic values of private, social and civic life, such as solidarity, responsibility, tolerance, respect, striving for social progress and understanding of social and cultural diversity. It can also foster the ability to communicate between individuals and groups with a different cultural background and help them live together in solidarity ([2]);

7. recognises that the ECOC programme has had a far-reaching economic, social and cultural impact; the title gives a strong impetus to the creative sector, which plays an important economic role in Europe in its own right, and acts as an economic driver for other sectors;

8. notes that cities which have been awarded the title ECOC have seen their cultural sector significantly strengthened and a sustained increase in cultural participation, particularly among young people;

9. stresses that local and regional authorities have the best understanding of the realities and situations facing (candidate) European Capitals of Culture, and are best placed to help design and implement the ECOC in full respect of the subsidiarity principle; furthermore, in most Member States, local and regional authorities have direct responsibility for ensuring that cultural events are well organised and delivered and therefore have a wealth of knowledge and experience, which can help in finding innovative and creative approaches;

Recommendations

A. *Continuation and intensification of the capital of culture scheme*

10. shares the European Commission's conclusion that the ECOC title remains highly valued, generates extensive cultural programmes and significant impacts ([3]); to this effect, calls for the continuation of the initiative, which should continue to foster the participation of citizens and long-term development; notes that the post-2019 ECOC should seek to adopt a balanced approach to culture, which should be supported not only as a means to deliver tangible and quantifiable returns on investment, but also for its own intrinsic value;

11. suggests that the ECOC programme can contribute to building the Europe of the future. Trends such as nationalism, individualism and consumerism as well as crumbling social infrastructure all require attention. Globalisation, increased mobility and open borders broaden our view on the world. Europeans are also "citizens of the world" but at the same time there is a need to protect and maintain people's own, local cultures. Europe should be able to allow local culture to blossom at the same time as an inclusive European identity is being developed; industrial, social and environmental innovation is crucial for leveraging European competitiveness, which will help to strengthen territorial cohesion;

12. notes that the ECOC programme needs to be based on the local and regional cultural scene, thus the involvement of citizens and all public and private bodies operating in the area is crucial throughout the different stages of the project; stresses that the ECOC needs to be a process in which local audiences are developed through educational programmes, participatory actions and raised awareness on local and European issues.

([1]) CdR 393/2003 fin.
([2]) CdR 251/2008 fin.
([3]) Ex Post evaluation of the 2010 European Capitals of Culture (Essen for the Ruhr, Pécs, Istanbul) COM(2011) 921 final.

European capitals of culture must be more closely involved in the actions and initiatives carried out by the EU in order to establish its current or future programmes in the cultural domain, gradually incorporating the possibility of even becoming areas where these activities take place;

13. recognises that the ECOC has proved effective in developing programmes which stimulate inclusion and intercultural dialogue, and notes that many of the previous Capital of Culture events have taken place in cities facing challenges of social cohesion and integration; access to culture is a major key to increased responsibility and citizenship, individual and collective welfare, social mobility, solidarity etc. Bearing this in mind, the ECOC programme must have the citizens and civil society at its core;

14. reaffirms its belief that the cultural sector plays an important part in attaining the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. It draws attention to the tremendous opportunities afforded by cultural tourism for the economic development of many regions. It nonetheless warns against placing one-sided emphasis on the purely economic importance of culture. Equally important is the importance of culture in creating a good and dynamic living environment, which is a prerequisite for development ([4]);

15. supports the idea that the ECOC instrument should continue after 2019, and suggests that it should be broadened to enable it to focus more on the search for, and discovery of, Europeans' multifaceted cultural identity/identities. To this end the content of the programme should be more open to other, non-European cultures and partners to highlight the value and richness of European cultures even more effectively;

B. *Multiannual context*

16. notes that the ECOC has evolved over the past 25 years from a summer festival to an all-year cultural event including important elements of cultural, social and economic development. Some cities have extended the scope of ECOC to include a number of years before and after the event. This approach has proved highly successful in encouraging the local population to participate in the ECOC year itself, in stimulating cultural development and participation, and in building international awareness and cooperation;

17. repeats that the multiannual approach has proved successful as it helps to consolidate the gains made in the city and region, as well as the new (European) networks which have arisen in connection with the ECOC title. It also helps to ensure, especially in these times of financial pressure, that investment in culture remains on the political agenda in the longer term. The current "city and citizens" criterion requires the event to be sustainable and an integral part of long-term cultural and social developments. Nevertheless, the majority of the ECOC still concentrates on organising cultural festivities in the course of the year. A more structured form of cooperation between the present, past and future European capitals of culture could make a positive contribution here;

18. reaffirms its belief that cities should use the event as a part of a long-term development strategy in order to promote more sustainable approaches to cultural development and enhance the impact and legacy of the ECOC cities as stated in the opinion on the *Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Community action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2007 to 2019*; in order to take these strategies forward in the long term and thus meet the new challenges at the local and regional levels, we reaffirm the value of drawing up and developing consensual cultural policies in the medium and long term. This will only be feasible if they are underpinned by clear institutional will and the full involvement of social stakeholders, both public and private;

19. recognises that the title of ECOC is awarded for one specific year; recalls the importance of placing the activities in a multiannual context and making them part of a long-term policy, in cultural, economic, social and spatial development terms;

20. emphasises that the Member States must give the implementation of the ECOC project the necessary attention and above all ensure that it is sustainable. The Member State concerned should give each individual ECOC project the required support and incorporate it into its long-term policy and strategy;

C. *Encouraging involvement of the surrounding region*

21. recognises that the ECOC programme has also evolved in terms of the types of cities and regions involved. In the first phase, the cities which were designated by the Member States were generally the capital city or other major cities. Then, over time, the title has increasingly been awarded to smaller cities ("second cities" or regional cultural centres). The declining size of the applicant city made the involvement of the surrounding region increasingly necessary; towns and cities are meeting places; they are centres of trade, industry, education or government; they are located at the heart of a region they reflect the character of the region; notes that this development was recognised through the inclusion of the regional dimension in the ECOC programme after 2007; stresses, therefore, the added value of encouraging a regional approach to the title of

([4]) CdR 172/2007 fin.

ECOC, including consideration of a regional level designation with the region as the primary cultural focus under the responsibility of the principal city of that region;

22. stresses that in the future the applicant city should be encouraged even more strongly to involve the surrounding region - or even euroregion in case of border cities - in the ECOC programme through partnership agreements safeguarding joint endeavours in all phases of the initiative; recognises the importance of a firm governance system ensuring the sustainability of political and financial commitment. Strong cross party political support including guarantee of the budget, artistic independence and involvement of citizens should be key factors in the governance system;

23. points out the vital role of networks and creative cities in the context of an open, innovative ecosystem in modern economies, as cities, regions, universities/research institutes and businesses increasingly cooperate with each other on strategic issues in order to gain economies of scale and scope, to generate knowledge spillovers and to coordinate infrastructure planning; calls for local and regional authorities to be closely involved in the preparation of legal frameworks and funding programmes;

24. recalls the importance of the European dimension of the event ([5]); agrees that the ECOC programme aims to promote European cooperation, highlight the richness of European culture and involve and mobilise citizens; repeats that encouraging the active involvement of surrounding regional territories in the ECOC programme would promote this objective and ensure that the positive effects are felt in a (broader) regional context;

25. reiterates that the European Commission should be alert to new developments in the ECOC scheme, studying them closely and giving them its backing; recalls that the European Commission, when drawing up its programmes, should take due account of the cultural potential of urban and regional partnerships – which are so important for society as a whole – and to take on board new, qualitative developments ([6]);

D. *Encouraging participation in the preselection*

26. acknowledges that the ECOC is one of the most successful EU programmes, as it provides the unparalleled opportunity for the host city and the surrounding region and even for the candidate cities to undertake a cultural, social and economic "leap forward", achieving in a few years a transformation that normally takes a generation;

27. encourages therefore stimulating a broad range of candidates to participate in the selection for the ECOC title; notes that experience from recent years shows that merely applying for selection has positive effects for candidate cities in terms of economic spin-offs and image. Competing for the title also gives rise to new (international) networks and improved cooperation between partners within a region;

28. recognises the problems which have arisen for the Member States and for the European jury system, resulting from having to deal with a growing number of applicant cities; increasing costs of bidding, and organisational issues related to the competition; urges the Commission to see the increasing number of candidates as a positive development and to adapt the selection procedure to reflect this after 2019;

29. stresses that the European Commission, the Member States and the candidate cities should work in close partnership in order to increase public awareness of the title in the cities and regions. The Commission should continue to develop the brand value of the ECOC title, Member States should broadly publicise the competition at the national level and the cities have a particular responsibility to use their direct contact with citizens to explain and communicate the benefits of the initiative. Indeed, without a clear understanding of the objectives of the ECOC title by citizens, it is difficult for a city to seek public support for its application. This can deter some potential candidates from bidding for the title;

30. points out that a stronger framework for the competition is desirable; suggests that the "competition" be arranged in such a way that all applicant cities contribute to the development of culture at European, national and/or regional level. The activities envisaged as part of the application process could be designed to show how each city or region would contribute to cultural policy goals, and could also include a commitment from all the cities to continue this work in the years leading up to the ECOC (regardless of the eventual "winner"). A clearer framework for the competition would help to reduce friction between cities and regions, and help candidates to contribute to wider EU and national agendas. In essence, this amounts to stimulating a healthy sense of "cooperating to compete";

31. urges the Commission to encourage the Member States to provide all possible support, through their national authorities and institutions, for the city selected as capital of culture;

E. *Selection procedure*

32. supports the system of rotation for Member States in which the title of ECOC is currently awarded (since 2007), acknowledging that this system guarantees equal chances for smaller cities and Member States to hold the title in spite of budgetary constraints;

([5]) CdR 393/2003 fin.
([6]) CdR 172/2007 fin.

33. calls on the European Commission to consider reintroducing in the new ECOC legal basis the possibility for cities in non-Member States to apply for the title; the experience of Istanbul 2010 points to this direction ([7]);

34. reaffirms that the CoR representative on the Selection Panel must continue to be one of its elected members, as has been standard practice in the past; recognises, however, that participation in the panel is not an honorary position, and that it entails a considerable workload and a significant responsibility vis-à-vis bidding cities; requests that the Commission confirm the role of the Committee of the Regions in the Monitoring Panel and that this panel continue to play an active role in ensuring that the synergies between the cultural programmes of the designated cities are developed in the programme preparation phase ([8]); thinks that it would be preferable to set more objective assessment criteria, from which bidding cities that are rejected can draw lessons and on which future bidding cities can base their bids.

Brussels, 15 February 2012.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Mercedes BRESSO

([7]) Ex Post evaluation of the 2010 European Capitals of Culture (Essen for the Ruhr, Pécs, Istanbul), COM(2011) 921 final.
([8]) CdR 251/2005 fin.