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European Capitals of Culture

Current issues and future prospects

SUMMARY *Between 1985 and 2012, 45 cities have held the title of European Capital of Culture. The success of the initial concept was such that in 1999, the Council of the EU transformed it into a Community action, and created a more transparent rotational system for the designation of the titleholder.*

Nowadays, the European Capitals of Culture are mainly seen as a "mega-event" backed by private investment and sponsorship which, along with the symbolic celebration of European cultural identities, is closely tied to the economic success of the operation. According to experts, over time a number of conflicts and tensions have become apparent due to the multiple and sometimes contradictory objectives of the event, i.e. economic and cultural, to name just two. Additional criticisms include failure to enable local ownership, inability to overcome social divides and exhaustion of local resources. This has in some cases led to the emergence of alternatives, or counter-movements.

An online consultation carried out by the European Commission in 2010, as part of the preparations for a new legal basis for the event after 2019, highlighted that the majority of participants (91%) wished to see the European Capitals of Culture events continue to take place, even though some emphasised the need for a revision of the selection procedure. The European Commission is expected to submit a new proposal by the end of July 2012.



Maribor, European capital of culture 2012.

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Background

In 1985, the European Union (EU) launched the European Capitals of Culture initiative, with Athens in Greece chosen as the first titleholder. Since then, 44 other cities have been designated European Capitals of Culture.

The success of the concept has inspired other regions in the world: ten years after its introduction in the EU, the Arab group in UNESCO initiated a similar event for Arab capitals.

According to experts[1], the European Capitals of Culture is "*arguably one of the most successful EU cultural programmes*". Practitioners claim that it is "*the longest running and firmly institutionalised explicit form of cultural policy in the EU.*" Over the past 25 years, the European Capitals of Culture event has increasingly come to be viewed by host cities as a tool to regenerate and reposition themselves in both economic and cultural terms.

However, in spite of the overall success of the initiative, almost all European Capitals of Culture have experienced some problems. These are mainly related to governance, leadership, management, financing and public relations. Host cities have often been criticised for failing to enable local cultural ownership, overcome real social divides, and create lasting cultural legacies.

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How it all started

The origins

The concept of 'cultural capitals' goes back to 1982, when the United Nations approved a declaration on the cultural dimension of development and a few years later UNESCO initiated a programme known as Regional Cultural Capitals.

The idea of the European Capitals of Culture was put forward in 1983 by the then Greek minister of culture Melina Mercouri, and it was launched as an inter-governmental initiative two years later under the name 'European City of Culture'. Mercouri's idea was to contribute to more interaction between Europeans and to enhance the European project, which had until then had no cultural content but was mainly based on economic values.

Other factors affecting the selection

A city is not chosen as European Capital of Culture for what it is, but rather for the contribution that it intends to make to the common cultural heritage through welcoming artists and performers from other Member States. Experts point out that jury members have a tendency to favour smaller cities against bigger ones. For instance, the Hungarian capital Budapest lost out to Pécs (2010), in the same way the Slovakian capital Bratislava lost out to Košice (2013).

Practitioners attribute this phenomenon to the extraordinary efforts made by smaller cities. Also larger cities have extensive cultural infrastructures which often different interests to those of the municipal institutions.

Source: European Cultural Capital 2 Report, R. Palmer, G. Richards, TRAM, 2009.

In 1992, culture was fully incorporated into the body of EU policies with the Maastricht Treaty (Article 128). This provided the legal basis for the European Capitals of Culture Community action, set up in 1999. Its aim was to "*highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures*" and to "*promote greater mutual acquaintance between European citizens*".

Current selection criteria

A new selection procedure was introduced in 2006. It integrated recommendations from stakeholders relating in particular to monitoring proposals in order to enhance their European dimension, improving competition between candidate cities, and redefining the role of the selection panel.

Since 2006, the European Capitals of Culture event is restricted to EU cities, which host it in turn in the order (see Figure 1) set by Parliament and the Council.

Under the new procedure – which applies to the 2013 and subsequent titles – the host country is responsible for selecting the city.

A panel of six national and seven independent European experts in the cultural field (nominated for three years: two by Parliament, two by the Council, two by the European Commission and one by the Committee of the Regions) assesses the bids against the criteria which are subdivided into two categories, "*European Dimension*" and "*City and Citizens*".

Concerns about the inclusion of the local population in events have been felt since the 1990. Practitioners claim that the current selection criteria reflect criticism addressed over "*parachuting in a branding package*". It explicitly encourages the participation of local citizens and highlights the fact that the events should be sustainable and form part of the long-term cultural and social development of a city.

Figure 1 - Order of Capitals of Culture until 2019

Year	European Capitals of Culture (*city not yet designated)
2012	Guimarães (Portugal), Maribor (Slovenia)
2013	Marseille (France), Košice (Slovakia)
2014	Umeå (Sweden), Riga (Latvia)
2015	Mons (Belgium), Plzeň (Czech Republic)
2016	Donostia-San Sebastián (Spain), Wrocław (Poland)
2017	Denmark*, Cyprus*
2018	Netherlands*, Malta*
2019	Italy*, Bulgaria*

Source: Decision No 1622/2006.

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Financing

The EU's financial contribution to the European Capitals of Culture amounts to €1.5 million per titleholder (from 2010) and takes the form of a Melina Mercouri Prize. This amount is expected to be topped up by local public and private investment.

According to the EU guidelines, the EU allocation must not exceed 60% of the total budget of the project submitted. However, in reality, host cities have been spending sums massively exceeding that requirement. As shown in Figure 2, the total operational expenditure (excluding infrastructure) of title-holding cities between 2000 and 2004 ranges from €8 million (Reykjavik, Iceland, 2000) to €74 million (Lille, France, 2008), with the average being €37 million.

Apart from the Melina Mercouri prize, host cities are also eligible for urban development funding under the EU's Structural Funds. Cultural bodies participating in the event may also obtain funding under the EU Culture programme.

Conflicts and tensions

The European Capitals of Culture have come to be viewed as a multi-dimensional initiative that is supposed to incorporate both economic and cultural objectives, represent local cultural heritage and European identities, host an international arts event while promoting the local cultural sector and committing to social inclusion. These multiple and sometimes contradictory objectives are inevitably difficult to reconcile.

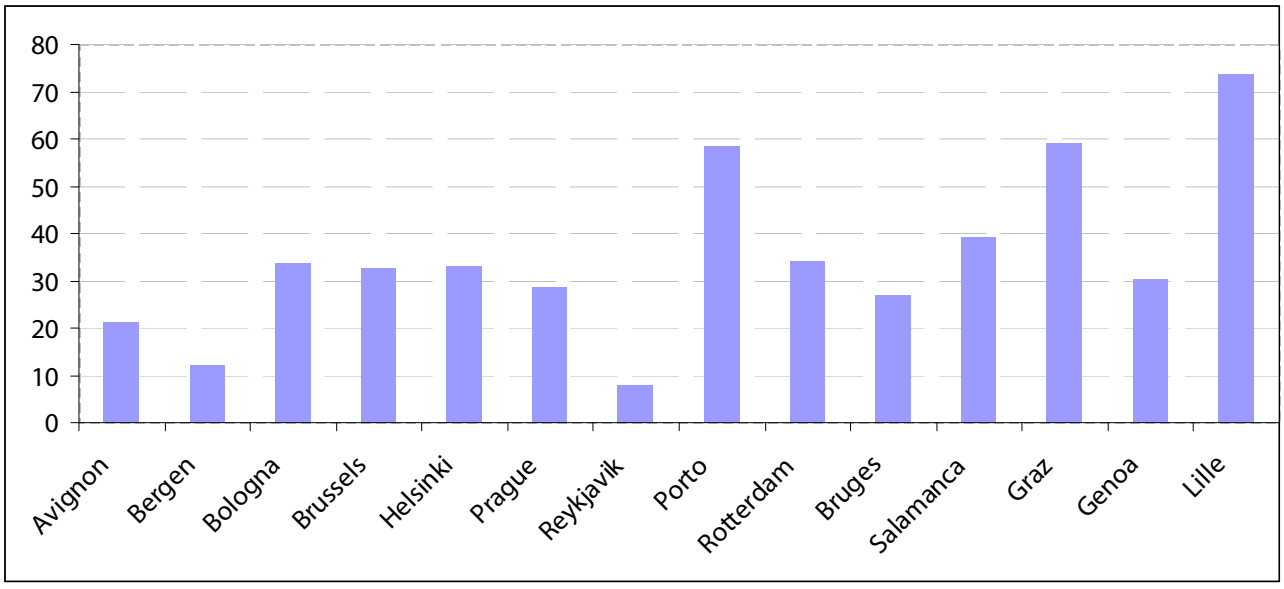
Creating durable cultural elites: in search of a good balance

Practitioners argue that the European Capitals of Culture event came to symbolise the emergence of a cultural elite, namely that the same people would still hold top positions in the cultural sphere of a given city many years after the event itself. For instance, the team coordinating the European Capitals of Culture in Helsinki (Finland) in 2000 managed the Eurovision Song Contest in the same city in 2007. This spurs fears that lack of change may result in difficulties for new actors and ideas to emerge.

A 'bourgeois playground'?

Experts wonder whether the European Capitals of Culture are not favouring only conventional cultural events related to the well-established cultural institutions and reflecting the cultural taste of the bourgeoisie in a process of *'cultural*

Figure 2 - Total expenditure for selected European Capitals of Culture from 2000 to 2004, in € million.



Source: European Cities and Capitals of Culture, Part II/Palmer/Rae, Vol. II, 2004.

gentrification', while forcing out more alternative and innovative art. According to them, this was the case in Stavanger (Norway, 2008) where the conventional cultural events came out on top.

Inclusion of local population: 'can do better'
The inclusion of the local population in the whole process remains an important issue which is often not sufficiently addressed. In many cases, the local population remains concerned that the focus of the event is usually on enhancing the touristic image of the city abroad rather than on the local community. On a few occasions, the European Capitals of Culture events have prompted counter-movements within the localities (as in Weimar, Germany, 1999).

Official brand image vs. local identity
In the run up to the European Capitals of Culture event, issues of cultural identity and local ownership often become politicised. Such tensions are usually exposed through the creation of alternative movements.

Such an alternative movement was, for instance, set up in Cork (2005). According to the group's founders, it was an attempt to create a space through which local discontent with the official event could be channelled into a productive creative outlet. Similarly, the project Turku - European Capitals of Subculture 2011 (Finland) provided an alternative space for those who disapproved of the 'institutional' campaign.

Social inclusion: empty rhetoric?
Experts argue that candidate cities are prone to rhetoric which demonstrates their wish to be perceived as '*inclusive*' when presenting their applications. This phenomenon has brought about a noticeable inflation of language over the years without many tangible results.

In addition, experts claim that the appropriateness of a social perspective in a cultural event remains controversial. Some cities - for example Lille (France, 2004) - have taken the view that social objectives should be mainstreamed within the programme, rather than treated as a separate issue. However, experts doubt that this could be achieved in practice, since marginalised people do not have the necessary leverage, be it financial or political, to pursue their objectives.

Exhaustion of local resources for culture
The European Capitals of Culture event is sometimes perceived as a threat, since it may entail the exhaustion of local funds dedicated to culture, especially when they are scarce.

For instance, in Turku (Finland, 2011) the main municipal library which was involved in the flagship project, has removed funding from local libraries, and the library network has been reduced. In the citizen's forum for Turku as Cultural Capital *'Hallo, does Turku hear us'* questions were raised about the opening hours of district libraries. Similarly, there were forum discussions about the removal of artists' studios and workspaces from the city-owned properties in the centre of Turku.

He who pays the piper calls the tune...
Experts argue that the low level of direct EU funding for the event makes it highly dependent on political will. Changes in political power between selection as the title-holder and implementation of the event can put the necessary commitment and resources in doubt, and result in conflict over funding, flagship projects or indeed the whole programme.

Evaluating impacts

The potential of the European Capitals of Culture has become increasingly recognised over recent years. This has gone hand in hand with the gradual introduction of evaluation reports. These evaluations, however, are mainly based on quantitative indicators, targeting economic impacts. This has prompted some fears among practitioners of "*turning the European Capitals of Culture into rather similar celebrations of European added value*".

The new legal basis adopted in 2006 obliged the European Commission to ensure the external independent evaluation of the results of the events in accordance with the objectives and criteria laid down in the decision, i.e. the European and social dimensions of the events, the efficiency of the actions and the sustainability of the projects.

European and social dimensions

The experts evaluating the 2007-2008 editions concluded that as far as the **European dimension** is concerned, the implementation of a wide range of activities has been efficient. However, the nature and the extent of the activities varied a lot and only "*modest attention*" was given to the development of European themes. The notion of the '*European dimension*' remained unclear and ambiguous and its importance was frequently under-estimated.

According to the same evaluation, the **social dimension** of the projects was not very prominent either, since it consisted mainly of widening access to culture, rather than of social inclusion in strict terms.

Efficiency and sustainability

The results of the 2009 evaluation highlighted the importance and difficulty of finding an appropriate and **efficient organisational structure** and building a team with the necessary competence to implement the programme. This requires a wide set of skills with the right mix of existing and seconded staff. There is also the need to balance artistic and political interests and to ensure that new delivery mechanisms are well accepted by existing stakeholders.

The experts examining the **sustainability** of the projects argue that European Capitals of Culture events are not intended to be sustained since they are of inherent one-off nature. However, many of the activities initiated in the title year have been sustained in subsequent years with the help of public authorities.

The way ahead

The current EU decision defines a chronological list of Member States entitled to nominate Capitals of Culture up to 2019. As part of a broad reflection process in advance of proposing a new legal instrument, the European Commission launched an online consultation in 2010.

Other elements of this process are the ex-post evaluations of past European Capitals of Culture, the evaluation of the current selection and monitoring procedures, as well as the conclusions of the 25-year anniversary conference, held in March 2010.

The Commission will take these various elements into consideration in its new proposal. It is expected to be submitted to the European Parliament and the Council under the ordinary legislative procedure by the end of July 2012.

Results of the public online consultation

Over 200 people from 34 countries participated in the consultation. Respondents were asked to give their opinion on the objectives, rules and procedures of the action.

The results of the consultation showed that 91% of participants wish to see the action continue after 2019.

Concerning the **objectives**, 63% of the respondents believed they were still relevant while 32% suggested a revision. However, there was little consensus on the nature of a possible revision.

Some ideas included aligning the European Capitals of Culture event with the Europe 2020 Strategy and strengthening its European values. The latter may be seen as particularly necessary, since when asked about the extent to which the event created tangible impacts, a '*more favourable view of Europe and the EU*' came at the bottom of the list.

The **selection criteria** was also deemed relevant *"to a great extent*" by 55% of the

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respondents. The results reflected the feeling that the criteria relating to *'City and Citizens'* were most relevant (81%) and should be given at least the same if not more importance in the future.

Moving to the **selection procedure** beyond 2019, three options were suggested: an open competition (37%), an alternative as yet undefined solution (34%), and a chronological list of Member States (25%). However, the risk of not selecting credible candidates in some Member States was highlighted in the comments. As a risk-mitigation measure some participants suggested either a restricted form of open competition or a combination of open competition and a chronological list, i.e. one city being chosen through an EU-wide competition and another one from a list.

The responses relating to the preferred **territorial coverage** were mixed. 27% considered that only cities should be eligible for the title, while 32% argued that metropolitan areas should also be able to compete and 38% favoured regions. Although many respondents confirmed that it would be interesting to cover wider territories, a number of difficulties were highlighted in their comments. These included the difficulty in defining regions and metropolitan areas, as well as the challenge of providing practical coordination across large areas with the risk of a lack of clear leadership. The majority of comments focused on the importance of preserving existing flexibility for cities to involve a broader area, rather than defining the title-holder through the administrative borders of the municipality.

The **re-opening of the competition to European third countries** was approved by 60% of the participants. The two successive EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 were the main reason for removing this option, since this reduced the number of potential candidate cities outside the EU and increased the number within.

Finally, concerning the **implementing measures** and notably the **monitoring system**, more than 80% of respondents declared that they were appropriate. Some participants encouraged the European Commission to foresee sanctions in case the title-holding cities did not fulfil the commitments made in their applications.

Further reading

Documentation Centre on European Capitals of Culture: provides all major studies and reports on the European Capitals of Culture online.

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Endnotes

[1] European Cultural Capital 2 Report, R. Palmer, G. Richards, TRAM, 2009.

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