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Ex-post evaluation of the 2019 European Capitals of Culture (Plovdid and Matera)

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INTRODUCTION

This document describes the methodology and findings of the ex-post evaluation of the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) Action for 2019.

Article 12 of Decision No 1622/2006/EC[1] (here after, the "Decision") requires that the Commission ensures the external and independent evaluation of the results of the ECOC from the previous year. The aim of the evaluation is to better understand how the two European Capitals of Culture of the previous year contributed to the objectives of the Action, whether they achieved their objectives and whether implementation proceeded in line with their original application. It is also to contribute to reinforcing the existing evidence-base on the ability of the Action to produce cultural, social and economic impact. Finally, the objective is to draw lessons, conclusions and recommendations that may be useful for Union institutions, future ECOC or cities wishing to bid for the ECOC title in the future.

The Commission started these yearly evaluations with the 2007 titles and the evaluation of the ECOC 2019 is the latest to date in a series of 12 similar yearly exercises. It is also the last yearly evaluation to be done by the Commission, as a new legal basis applies from the ECOC 2020 titles onwards[2], making cities themselves (instead of the Commission) responsible for the evaluation of the results of theirs years as ECOC[3].

This staff-working document is the fifth covering the ECOC Action in as many years, while the Action in itself has not changed in the period considered, with only the pair of cities hosting the Action being different each year.

This staff-working document summarizes the findings of the external evaluation of the implementation of the ECOC 2019, including the selection and monitoring procedures as well as the operational delivery by the two hosting cities, namely Matera in Italy and Plovdiv in Bulgaria[4]. The evaluation examined how the two cities developed their respective applications and cultural programmes, how they delivered the planned initiatives throughout the year and any cultural, general and longer-term impact generated by the Action.

The evaluation constitutes a valuable opportunity to reconsider critically the past year with the intention of collecting further insight and lessons based on the experiences of the host cities.

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1 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 2019 (OJ L 304, 3.11.2006, p. 1), available at:

- http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:304:0001:0006:EN:PDF.

2 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 and repealing Decision No 1622/2006/EC (OJ L 132, 3.5. 2014, p. 1), available at: No 1622/2006/EC, available at:

- http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG

3 Article 16(1) of Decision No 445/2014/EU.

4 Full document available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/01ae1db0-3a98-11eb-b27b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en.

It is worth reiterating here what was underlined in last year's staff-working document[5], namely that the aim of the yearly evaluation is not to lead to any change in the regulation governing the ECOC Action. Indeed, as mentioned above, those rules already changed in 2014[6], but the new rules only apply for cities designated as ECOC for the years from 2020 to 2033[7]. It would therefore be premature to use the outcomes of the evaluation of the two ECOC 2019, governed by previous Decision No 1622/2006/EC, to draw conclusions related to Decision No 445/2014/EU, which introduced changes in particular regarding the selection procedure, monitoring arrangements or the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize[8].

1. BACKGROUND TO THE INTERVENTION

1.1. The European Capital of Culture Action

The initial scheme of "the European City of Culture" started at an intergovernmental level in 1985[9] upon an idea of the then Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri. The scheme recognized Europe as a centre for artistic development, underpinned by an exceptional cultural richness and diversity, with cities playing a vital role in the formation and spread of cultural expressions.

In 1999, Decision 1419/1999/EC of the European Parliament and the Council[10] gave the scheme the status of a Community Action under the name of "European Capital of Culture" and set up a more predictable, consistent and transparent system for the designation of hosting cities. Its legal foundation was Article 151 of the Treaty (now Article 167), which calls on the Union to "contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore". The Decision introduced new selection procedures and evaluation criteria while Member States were ranked in a chronological order of entitlement to host the event each year.

In 2005, the European Parliament and the Council adopted Decision 649/2005/EC[11] to integrate the ten countries that joined the European Union in 2004.

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5 SWD(2020) 165 final of 18.08.2020.

6 See footnote n° 2.

7 Article 17 of Decision No 445/2014/EU.

8 The new Decision, which covers the ECOC titles 2020 to 2033, retains the general structure and main elements of the previous Decision but introduced improvements to maximise the benefits of holding the title as well as taking part in the competitive process for all bidding cities and their citizens. Improvements include among others the introduction of more explicit and measureable criteria, the reinforcement of conditionality for the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize and the obligation for the cities – instead of the Commission – to carry out the ex-post evaluation of the ECOC year.

9 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), on the initiative of the former Greek Culture Minister, Melina Mercouri.

10 Decision 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).

11 Decision 649/2005/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 April 2005 amending Decision No 1419/1999/EC establishing a Community action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2005 to 2019 (OJ L 117, 4.5.2005).

In 2006, a new Decision – Decision 1622/2006/EC[12] – entered into force. This Decision kept the principle of a chronological order of Member States but further refined the objectives of the Action and introduced new selection and monitoring arrangements. Decision 1622/2006/EC is the legal basis governing the European Capital of Culture event for the titles 2007 to 2019.

As mentioned under section 1, in April 2014, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a new Decision, but cities designated as ECOC for the years up to 2019 continue being regulated by Decision No 1622/2006/EC.

The 2014 Decision was, in turn, amended in September 2017 to open the ECOC Action to European Free Trade Association countries that are parties to the Agreement on the European Economic Area[13]. It was again amended, in December 2020, to take account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the two ECOC 2020 (Rijeka in Croatia and Galway in Ireland) and on the preparatory work of the three ECOC 2021 (Elefsina in Greece, Timisoara in Romania and Novi Sad in Serbia)[14].

1.2. Objectives of the ECOC Action

The ECOC Action aims to highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures and the features they share, thereby promoting greater mutual understanding among European citizens, as well as to foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of the cities. ECOC shall strive to foster cooperation between cultural operators, artists and cities in Europe, foster the participation in cultural activities of the citizens living in the city and surroundings while raising the interest of citizens from abroad, to be sustainable and to be an integral part of the long-term cultural and social development of the city.

The hierarchy of objectives presented in the table below is based on the objectives as stated in Decision No 1622/2006/EC, but it has been updated to reflect the content of the new legal basis for ECOC post-2019. The general and strategic objectives are taken directly from Article 2 of Decision No 445/2014/EU, with the operational objectives flowing logically from these. They are also informed by the selection criteria detailed in Article 5 of the 2014 Decision.

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[12] Decision 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 2019 (OJ L 304, 3.11.2006).

[13] Decision (EU) 2017/1545 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 September 2017 amending Decision No 445/2014/EU establishing a Union action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033 (OJ L 237, 15.9.2017). Text available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32017D1545.

[14] Decision (EU) 2020/2229 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 December 2020 amending Decision No 445/2014/EU establishing a Union action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033 (OJ L 437, 28.12.2020). This Decision provides Rijeka and Galway with the possibility to extend their title-year until end of April 2021 and postpones the title-year of Novi Sad from 2021 to 2022 and the title-years of Elefsina and Timisoara from 2021 to 2023. Text available at : https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32020D2229

Table on ECOC hierarchy of objectives

General objective			
Safeguard and promote the diversity of cultures in Europe, highlight the common features they share, and foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities			
Specific objectives (SO)			
SO1: Enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offer in cities, including through transnational co-operation	SO2: Widen access to and participation in culture	SO3: Strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sector and its links with other sectors	SO4: Raise the international profile of cities through culture
Operational objectives			
Stimulate a diverse range of cultural activities of high artistic quality Implement cultural activities promoting cultural diversity, dialogue and mutual understanding Implement cultural activities highlighting (shared) European cultures and themes Involve European artists, promote cooperation with different countries and transnational partnerships	Create new and sustainable opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural events Involve local citizens, artists and cultural organizations in development and implementation Provide opportunities for volunteering and foster links with schools and other education providers	Improve cultural infrastructure Develop the skills, capacity or governance of the cultural sector Stimulate partnership and co-operation with other sectors Combine traditional art forms with new types of cultural expression	Attract the interest of a broad European and international public

2. IMPLEMENTATION / STATE OF PLAY

2.1. The selection and monitoring of the European Capitals of Culture 2019

In accordance with Decision No 1622/2006/EC, Italy and Bulgaria were the two Member States entitled to host the ECOC in 2019.

Under this Decision, host countries are responsible for the procedure leading to the selection of one of their cities as "European Capital of Culture". This is done through an open competition within the Member State concerned. Against this background, the relevant managing authorities of Italy and Bulgaria, respectively the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, on the one hand, and the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, on the other hand, ran parallel competitions, which both started with the publication of a call to trigger applications from interested cities.

The selection happens in two phases: a pre-selection round (candidate cities are reduced to a short-list) followed by a selection round (one city is recommended for the title). A panel of thirteen members – six of whom nominated by the Member State concerned and the other seven by European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions) – examines the bids from candidate cities based on the objectives and criteria laid down in the Decision.

In Italy, the Ministry issued its 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 become, in 2019, the fourth Italian city to get the ECOC title after Florence in 1986, Bologna in 2000 and Genoa in 2004[15].

In Bulgaria, the Ministry published its call for applications in December 2012. By the deadline of 18 October 2013, eight cities had submitted a bid. At the pre-selection meeting in December 2013, four of them (Plovdiv, Sofia, Varna and Veliko Tarnovo) were short-listed. In October 2014, the panel recommended that the ECOC 2019 title in Bulgaria, the first ever in the country, be awarded to Plovdiv.

The Council of the European Union formally designated Matera and Plovdiv as ECOC 2019 in a Decision adopted in May 2015[16].

In line with Decision No 1622/2006/EC, once designated as ECOC and until the title-year, the two cities had to adhere to a monitoring procedure directly managed by the Commission.

All along this phase, the progress in the cities' preparations was monitored and guided by a panel composed of the seven independent experts appointed by the European Union

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

16 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

institutions and bodies, which also checks compliance with the programme and commitments on the basis of which the two cities had been selected. As part of this process, Matera and Plovdiv submitted progress reports and attended two formal monitoring meetings with the panel that the Commission convened respectively in October 2016 and in April 2018. On top of that, the Commission organized an informal post-designation meeting (that does not result in public reports, as it does not have a formal status) between the panel and both Matera and Plovdiv in September 2015. There were also *in situ* visits (whereby a delegation of the panel and staff members of the Commission visit a hosting city to get a better insight of the development of the project) in both Matera and Plovdiv during the monitoring phase.

Over this period, the panel made a number of recommendations to the two cities, in particular to ensure that they adequately involve all relevant groups of citizens, develop an ambitious European dimension, put in place a clear governance setting, clarify and accelerate the financial commitments and reflect on a proper legacy of their ECOC-year.

As was the case for all previous ECOC, during the development period, the two cities introduced modifications into the programme described in their original applications, either in response to a changing environment or to the recommendations made by the panel.

The monitoring process culminated with the panel making a positive recommendation to the Commission on awarding the €1.5m prize in honour of Melina Mercouri to both cities after the last monitoring meeting in April 2018. Based on this positive recommendation, in the autumn 2018, the Commission awarded and paid the prize to the two ECOC 2019 from the budget of the EU Creative Europe programme[17].

The sub-sections below describe the main features of the ECOC programmes of Matera and Plovdiv. They are based on the final report of the contract supporting the evaluation. This final report contains further information, including on the way the programmes had a European dimension and involved citizens (as these are the main two criteria of the ECOC Action) as well as on the development of the applications and the governance and funding structures.

2.2. Matera 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 also known as the "Cittá Sotteranea" (the "Underground City"). Today, Matera is known worldwide for its historical centre, known as "I Sassi", with ancient cave dwellings inhabited since the Palaeolithic period. In 1993, this part of the city was awarded a World Heritage Site by Unesco.

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 has a strong rural focus and tradition, and agriculture has represented the main economic activity for many centuries. Today, Matera is characterised by a diversified economic sector, largely impacted by the rise of

[17] 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, p.221).

the tourism, handcraft and research sectors, which are replacing the local "furniture district" emerged in the last decades of 20th century.

The decision to prepare an ECOC application was taken by the municipality of Matera in 2010, as a result of the growing interest towards this initiative within the city and among local cultural and youth associations. The 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.

Under the title "OpenFuture", the cultural programme aimed to "strengthen 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". The programme was articulated around five different thematic lines:

- Ancient Futures: to explore the relationship with nature and landscape;
- Continuity and disruptions: to implement a process aimed at understanding how to collectively give shape to our cities and find beauty in the spaces inhabited on a daily basis;
- Utopias and dystopias: to test new radical models that challenged specific assumptions with the aim to changing attitudes and mentality;
- Roots and routes: to focus on the culture of mobility that brings together European citizens; and
- Reflections and connections: to re-examine identity and provide citizenship with a new model of 'everyday life' based on art, science and the widespread practice of cultural citizenship.

Furthermore, two infrastructural projects were at the heart of the programme and explored across these five overarching themes: I-DEA (Institute of Demo-Ethno-Anthropological Archive) – an archive meant to collect a large number of public documents and material from private collections and cultural associations –, and the Open Design School, meant as the first European design school founded on the principles of open culture, as it brought together authors, bloggers, designers, craftsmen, hackers, graduates, students and professionals.

The responsibility for the organisation and implementation of the ECOC project was entrusted to a new body, the Matera-Basilicata Foundation 2019, which was created as a public entity in 2014. The overall ECOC programme was overseen by a Board of Directors and a Board of Trustees, including the dean and associate professors from the Basilicata University, the mayor of Matera and representatives from the Matera Province and the Basilicata regional authority. In addition, a dedicated and international Scientific Board provided relevant expertise and advice to the managing boards. Local authorities and officials were also directly involved in the Foundation with managing roles. While a General Manager was responsible for the general administration, marketing, communication and fundraising, three managers were in charge of the implementation of three specific departments: Networking, Administration and Cultural programming.

As far as budget is concerned, the figure indicated in the application amounted to €52m. The actual budget for the delivery of the ECOC was very close to the initial planning at €54,8m. Approximately €47m was covered by the public purse: €33.2m was provided by the national Government, €12.2m came from the regional authority and the Matera municipality while the rest of the public contribution (€1.6m) was secured through EU and national funding applications, including the Melina Mercouri prize. Finally, some limited funding was secured through private partnerships and sponsorships.

2.3. Plovdiv 2019

Plovdiv is the second largest city in Bulgaria after the capital city Sofia, with a population of around 347,000 people. 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. Originally a Thracian settlement, it was subsequently inhabited by Persians, Greeks, Celts, Romans, Goths, Bulgars, Slavs and Turks. As a result, it boasts a diverse cultural heritage and a multi-ethnic population. Its location on the banks of the Maritsa River, the longest river in the Balkans, and at the foot of the Rhodope Mountains makes it an attractive tourist centre.

The economy of Plovdiv has long traditions in manufacturing, commerce, transport, communications and tourism. The city has also a vibrant atmosphere for young people with its six universities and is known among Bulgarians as the city of "Ayliak", a Turkish word used to express a relaxed attitude to life. Plovdiv has a large variety of museums, galleries, theatres, an opera and the only Centre for Contemporary Art of its kind in Bulgaria, situated in the premises of an ancient bath from the period of the Turkish Empire. It also boasts numerous remains from antiquity, including an Ancient Theatre, one of the world's best preserved ancient theatres, which is frequently used to host cultural events.

The main motivation for Plovdiv bidding for the ECOC was to use culture as a driver of change for challenges related to its multi-ethnic background, cultural heritage and belonging to the wider European context. These typical features and specific challenges of the city context became fundamental elements of the ECOC application and overall programme and is where most themes and projects were focused. Under the motto, "Together", inspired by the co-existence of different ethnic minorities, social groups and religious communities, the cultural programme was structured around the following four thematic platforms:

- Fuse: to explore how best to integrate Plovdiv's ethnic and minority groups and to bring together different generations and social groups, in order to overcome exclusion in isolated territories;
- Transform: to focus on the revitalization of forgotten and abandoned urban spaces and on changing the perceptions of such spaces among citizens;
- Revive: to preserve cultural heritage in a contemporary context by improving the access to it and stimulating the use of new technology and digital media; and
- Relax: to promote sustainable living, slow life, slow food and de-growth.

Furthermore, with regard to content, for the very first time in Bulgaria, there was a clear willingness from the ECOC delivery team to attempt to add a social dimension to the cultural offer in the city, addressing through the cultural programme issues such as injustice, inequality and environmental matters but also 'deeper' issues in society such as the integration of the Roma minority in the city's Stolipinovo district and raising awareness on LGBT issues.

As with other ECOC, the implementation of the ECOC was entrusted to an ad hoc entity, the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, which was created in September 2011 first to develop the application and then to implement the project. The Board of Directors was the main governing body of the Foundation, consisting of members designated by the City Council of Plovdiv. The role of the Board was to examine and approve the main documents related to the Foundation's activities such as the annual programmes, reports, budgets and expenditures. The day-to-day implementation of the ECOC was led by the Executive

Director and the Artistic Director, who shared the same level of responsibility. They were assisted by three Deputy Directors, respectively in the areas of Marketing, Advertising and Commercial Activity; International Relations; and the Programme itself.

The original total budget (covering both operation and infrastructure) planned at application stage for the delivery of the ECOC project was estimated at €38.2m, with the national Government, the City of Plovdiv and private sponsors contributing respectively €10m, €23.2m, and €3.5m. In practice, the total budget amounted to €29.4m. The decrease was partly due to the fact that the Foundation failed to reach its ambitious goal in terms of private sector's income (the actual figure was €0.5m, far from the original target[18]) and the contribution from the City budget was also lower than expected at €5.7m[19].

3. METHOD

In order for results to be comparable with previous evaluations, the methodology for this evaluation closely followed the approach adopted in previous assessments of the Action. The focus has been on research at city level and, in particular, the gathering of data and stakeholders' views from both Matera and Plovdiv. The main evaluation sources can be identified as follows:

- EU level literature[20]: this included generic EU policy and legislative briefings, papers, decisions and other documents relating to ECOC. This mainly focussed on reports of the panels for selection and monitoring and the original bidding guidance to understand how the two ECOC established themselves in the early days. Academic research was also consulted regarding the ECOC Action and the role of culture in the development of cities;
- ECOC level literature from Matera and Plovdiv: this included original bids and applications, internal reports linked to the application, monitoring or evaluation processes, application packages for calls for proposals and numerous pieces of literature collected on the cultural programme itself;
- Quantitative data: where available, evidence linked to each ECOC was collected in relation to budgets and expenditures, projects' numbers and types, participation and audience figures, social media data, statistics from AirBnB and Vrbo rental properties, number of domestic and international tourists, as well as other pieces of quantitative data to show and describe the work and benefits of the ECOC;
- A total of 60 interviews were conducted (30 in relation with Matera, 29 in relation with Plovdiv and one with an EU expert). These included:
    - Interviews with managing teams: those responsible for the day-to-day design and delivery of the ECOC were interviewed in each city remotely in the period from April to June 2020. Almost all of key staff within the delivery agencies were interviewed, including those responsible for the

[18] It should be noted in this respect that using private sponsors' funding for cultural content is not a widespread practice in Bulgaria, as compared to other EU countries.

[19] This figure however does not include funding from the City of Plovdiv for infrastructure investments made from the start of the bidding process until the actual designation in 2015, as well as investments made in the title year, which would be finalised in 2020 and 2021.

[20] Full list of EU level and ECOC level literature is in Annex 1 of the final report submitted by the contractor supporting the evaluation.

executive management, artistic direction, marketing and communication, international relations, project implementation and financial management;
    - Interviews with other key stakeholders: remote interviews were also undertaken with stakeholders both directly and indirectly involved in either the planning or delivery of the ECOC along with those more widely linked to the cultural, social, economic or political agenda of the host cities. Stakeholders included those working in cultural organisations, local authorities, representatives of the business sector and tourism agencies, media organisations, as well as voluntary and community organisations. Managers of individual projects and activities supported through the ECOC that made up the cultural programme of each city were also interviewed. In addition, some international partners of the host cities were interviewed, which provided an external perspective on the ECOC;
    - Interviews with EU-level stakeholders: one member of the selection and monitoring panel gave feedback;
- Survey among project leaders and cultural operators in Matera: in order to corroborate evaluation findings, a survey among project leaders and cultural operators in Matera was conducted, but the response rate was extremely low at 5%, most likely due to survey fatigue as the same stakeholders had been already surveyed by the Foundation and other research organisations. The survey aimed to collect evidence of impact of the ECOC on the cultural sector and the capacity of cultural operators. To assess this aspect in absence of representative results from the survey, the study team used: 1) data on the capacity building activities implemented; 2) qualitative evidence from interviews (including projects); 3) statistical data on cultural sector;
- In Plovdiv, in the period from 2017 until 2020, several surveys (i.e. a representative survey among the adult population of Plovdiv, a poll among visitors of ECOC events and a survey among Roma households in the city district of Stolipinovo) as well as 50 interviews with cultural institutions were conducted by the private consultancy company commissioned to monitor the ECOC. As there was already extensive data collected and in order to avoid duplication of stakeholder consultation activities, no survey was launched in Plovdiv within the ex-post evaluation of ECOC 2019;
- The evaluation does not include a wider public consultation. As explained in the roadmap[21], the Action is considered to be local while international participation is scattered within and outside Europe and is difficult to reach. On the other hand, the opinions would be based on attendance to specific events and would not give useful insights for the evaluation of the ECOC Action as a whole.

The final report of the contract supporting the evaluation provides a detailed understanding of the 2019 ECOC Action and within this an assessment of the work and progress of Matera and Plovdiv. There are, however, issues to consider when assessing the strengths of the evidence base used for this study:

- As already mentioned in previous evaluations, an ideal way of conducting this evaluation would entail a before ('baseline') study and an after-picture ('ex-post') study, instead of carrying out the latter alone. The impossibility of comparing the two studies affects the accuracy of the evaluation. This means that any baseline

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

information and assessment prior to the ECOC year relies on secondary evidence supplied by the ECOC cities;
- Moreover, since the evaluation was undertaken from December 2019 until October 2020, i.e. at the very end and shortly after the end of the ECOC time framework, some of the effects of the programme had not manifested themselves entirely. Many stakeholders involved in the evaluation commented that the real impact of the ECOC on the city and its residents would take time to filter through;
- In this respect, the Commission once again highlights that budget[22] and timing[23] only allow for an ex-post evaluation to take place and therefore only an after picture has been studied;
- An ulterior consequence of the modest yearly budget allocated to the evaluation is the fact 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;
- Detailed modelling, economic impact assessments or large-scale surveys were outside the scope of this study due to the budget constraints. This evidence used outside of the interviews is dependent on the local evaluation and other research commissioned by the ECOC cities. If the cities have commissioned large and ambitious evaluations which provide quantitative data on impacts, economic benefits and population surveys before, during and after the ECOC year then the European evaluation will greatly benefit from this information.

4. ANALYSIS AND ANSWERS TO THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

This part of the report presents a diagnosis of the implementation of the ECOC Action in 2019. It draws together the results relating to the two ECOC 2019 and to a lesser extent the findings from previous ECOC evaluations.

All figures and evidence appearing in the following sub-sections come directly from the report of the external ex-post evaluation of the two ECOC 2019. The reader will find in the full text of the document many more examples illustrating the conclusions presented below.

Very often, examples and figures can illustrate different points made under "relevance", "efficiency", "effectiveness", "sustainability", "EU added value" and "coherence". They are therefore sometimes repeated in various sub-sections. However, for the ease of the reading, repetitions have been limited to the minimum and the reader is invited to correlate some conclusions presented below with examples or figures that may have been given in previous paragraphs or may be given in following ones.

4.1. Relevance

Findings from the ECOC 2019 evaluation show that the two title-holders developed and implemented cultural programmes that were consistent with the EU Treaty, in particular

[22] The budget allocated to the evaluation work (70 000 €) is proportionate to the low level of EU funding directly provided to the ECOC (i.e. an award based on a recommendation of the panel after the final monitoring meeting in the form of the €1.5m Melina Mercouri Prize).

[23] Decision No 1622/2006/EC requires that the Commission conduct the evaluation immediately after the title year.

Article 167[24], as well as with Decision No 1622/2006/EC. Indeed, the ECOC Action was a good vehicle for the two cities hosting the title in 2019 to promote cultural diversity and highlight commonalities, contributing in this way to the "flowering" of the local, national and European cultural scene. As is shown in following sub-sections through many concrete examples, the two cities organized thousands of events on top of their usual cultural offer. These events covered all types of cultural and artistic disciplines, targeted many groups of audiences and presented various aspects of the diversity and common features of cultures in Europe, notably through co-operations with partners from other European countries and beyond.

Matera's drivers for bidding – i.e. using the ECOC title as an opportunity for a cultural renovation, opening up the city to Europe, strengthening a diversified cultural offer and widening access to and participation in culture – were quite in line with the objectives of the overall ECOC Action, and the initial intentions became a reality during the preparation and implementation years of the ECOC project, in particular thanks to the ongoing commitment of local organisations and citizens all along the process. The main motivations for Plovdiv wanting to get the ECOC title, using culture as a driver of change for challenges related to its multi-ethnic background, cultural heritage and belonging to the wider European context, also corresponded to the objectives of the ECOC Action, and found a concrete translation in the many projects included in the ECOC cultural programming. This is illustrated in the paragraphs below.

The European dimension in Matera

The cultural activities that were part of Matera 2019 ECOC programme contributed to promote cultural diversity, dialogue and mutual understanding.

First, Matera 2019 involved a large number of international artists, project managers and partner associations. Out of the total number of artists and the project leaders involved by the Foundation, 45% were international. In addition, over 1,000 international mobility programmes were realised with 55 different countries. A total of 15 debates involving international artists took place on themes such as urban regeneration, cultural engagement and productions. This is all the more remarkable because, prior to its ECOC year, it was widely recognized that the city and the region suffered from a lack of international connections and partnerships and had a limited capacity to attract international cultural operators. To address this challenge, the Foundation put in place several activities already during the lead in period to the title-year. A good illustration is the 'Go&See' action, which allowed 27 local cultural operators to visit another EU country to meet artists or other cultural organisations they wanted to collaborate with or learn from.

Another aspect that strongly contributed to the promotion of the European dimension were the efforts made to host artists from all over the world, in particular from Europe. The involvement and participation of these artists in many cultural events and initiatives led to a diversification of the local cultural offer and greatly contributed to promote a European and international dimension in the programme. As an example, the initiative 'Residenze Matera 2019' established different artistic residences that promoted European cultural values and diversity. In this framework, a total of 41 artists from all the EU countries, but also from Switzerland, the UK and Turkey, were hosted in Matera[25]. In

[24] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E167.

[25] Foundation Matera 2019. Final Monitoring Report: A Matera si produce cultura. Accessed from: https://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/it/report-2019/a-matera-si-produce-cultura.html

addition, 421 international artists were hosted in Matera or in other cities in Basilicata to cooperate with the Foundation and project leaders on the design and implementation of the original productions of Matera 2019.

Finally, leveraging on the ECOC brand, the Foundation aimed to reinforce the links with former ECOC by organising capacity-building activities with Aarhus (sustainability policies and volunteers), Leeuwarden (work with communities) and Marseille (safety of public events, circus and legacy). There was also collaboration with Plovdiv as further illustrated below in the corresponding paragraph dedicated to Plovdiv.

The "City and Citizens" dimension in Matera

Matera's original application stressed that the cultural programme would be centred on the citizens, who were seen as the real protagonists of the ECOC 2019. As already mentioned above, the ultimate original goal was to make Matera a European co-creation capital through the direct involvement of citizens in the development and implementation of cultural projects, activities and laboratories.

According to the evaluator, this was achieved through the very pro-active willingness of the Foundation: i) to include different sub-segments of citizens in the cultural activities organised (such as, for example, migrants, refugees and people with disabilities in the project Silent Academy[26]), ii) to encourage local citizens to actively participate in the preparation of cultural events through open public calls (they resulted in 80 applications and ultimately 27 projects) and iii) to provide them with tools to facilitate their direct involvement (with a strong emphasis on co-creation and capacity building through workshops, trainings and brainstorming sessions).

A very telling example of such a commitment was (and still is) the Open Design School, which provided (and continues providing) a laboratory of interdisciplinary experimentation and innovation. It rapidly became a meeting, sharing, mutual learning and practising place, where citizens had the opportunity to cooperate with over 100 national and international artists. With the direct involvement of citizens, the School contributed to the realisation of nine large exhibitions, 11 urban installations, 10 cultural events (including the opening ceremony) and to the mapping of 400 venues and locations for cultural activities scattered all over Matera.

The European dimension in Plovdiv

As was the case in Matera, the ECOC project in Plovdiv was a good vehicle to implement cultural activities promoting cultural diversity, dialogue and mutual understanding.

The main challenge here was, as in Matera, the insufficient level of international cooperation among the city's cultural operators prior to the ECOC year. To remedy this, Plovdiv 2019 had a proactive approach. First, it implemented specific capacity building activities to encourage and help cultural operators to find European partners. Second, it identified suitable topics in the cultural programme that would help stimulate the European dimension, such as – in particular – the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin, which has, of course, important connotations for all the countries in Southeast Europe as it marked the end of communist regimes in the region, but also a very strong Europe resonance across the whole European Union. Finally, it embedded the European dimension in the assessment criteria of the open calls for project proposals: if a project

[26] Il Sicomoro. Official website. Accessed from: http://ilsicomoro.net/progetti/silent-academy/

stimulated local, national or international partnerships with cultural operators and organisations in the Balkans and Europe, their application would receive a higher score.

As a result, and as further developed in sub-section 5.3 below, there were four times more international cooperation arrangements and co-productions in 2019 than in the baseline year of 2017, which the evaluator seems as a very promising achievement.

Finally, Plovdiv 2019 also worked with Matera 2019, especially on communication (with joint presentations and dedicated info points established in the two cities to promote the cultural activities of the other ECOC), exchange of volunteers and six joint cultural projects (including for the opening ceremonies) as a way to reinforce the links and visibility of the two 2019 ECOC title-holders.

The "City and Citizens" dimension in Plovdiv

Stimulating access and participation in cultural events was a strong element of the ECOC project in Plovdiv, in line with the "Together" motto of Plovdiv 2019, inspired by the co-existence of different communities.

According to the external evaluation, a positive element in this respect was that the original application resulted from consultations with citizens at a rather early stage, with the team having numerous meetings, discussions and focus groups with local organisations, institutions, cultural communities and individual citizens from 2013 onwards.

As a consequence, the cultural activities developed all along the years were related to topics that were of interest for the local citizens and communities, such as the heritage of ethnic minorities and urban regeneration issues.

Activities implemented all along the year were also targeted at different groups of society, including children and youth (such as the "Listen to Us – Artistic Intelligence" project – which included an educational programme aimed to get the children in schools and kindergartens acquainted with contemporary art and stimulate their creative thinking), people with disabilities, elderly people and minority groups (such as the "GetToStolipinovo" project, which presented this Roma populated neighbourhood as "the place to go" and included in particular workshops and seminars to have discussions with the inhabitants on youth field work and ways to solve community problems). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that citizen involvement was a key aspect of the Fuse platform and more specifically of two of its clusters, i.e. "Mahala", which focused on the integration of Roma and Turkish communities, and "RegionalE", targeted at people living in the small villages and towns of the entire Plovdiv region.

With regard to financial accessibility of the programme for citizens, it is important to note that 61% of the ECOC events in 2019 (i.e. 313 out of 513 public events in total) had free entrance, against only 10% in the baseline year 2017, which is also a positive development.

4.2. Efficiency

As was also systematically the case in previous ex post evaluations, it appears from the report of the contractor that overall, the ECOC remains an efficient EU Action, providing good levels of benefits for the EU for relatively little EU investment. Indeed, the only direct contribution from the European Union, in the form of the €1,5m Melina Mercouri prize awarded to each ECOC, is dwarfed by the total amount of money invested by the host cities in designing and delivering the ECOC (the operational budgets were approximately €54.8m for Matera and €10.0m for Plovdiv).

Without the initial EU impetus to support the ECOC, it is unlikely that the host cities would have invested anywhere near the amount of funding they did in connection with the ECOC title. The possibility of securing the title typically stimulates cities – but also their respective regional / national public authorities and private partners – to invest much more heavily in culture than they would in the absence of the ECOC. This is true in terms of both infrastructure and expenditure in cultural events and activities. The final report of the contract supporting the evaluation concludes that this means the Action remains highly efficient in terms of returns from the Melina Mercouri prize.

As far as the efficiency of management arrangements is concerned, both ECOC encountered some challenges, which they however ultimately overcome to a good extent.

After it was created in 2014, the Matera 2019 Foundation went through an 'interrupted rhythm' of work, mainly due to the lack of continuity in local government resulting from the 2015 municipal elections. This impasse was unblocked around the time of the first monitoring meeting in October 2016 in Brussels, and the process accelerated in the following months, with the recruitment of most vacant key team positions throughout 2017. Despite the initial political instability that characterised part of Matera's ECOC experience, the Foundation could finally count on support at local, regional and national levels. However, according to the evaluator, the delays in finalising the recruitment of the Foundation staff (completed only few months before 2019) hindered the timely preparation of some activities and events. Moreover, structuring the Foundation as a public entity increased the administrative and bureaucratic burdens of its activities, while according to key stakeholders, it is necessary to have an agile structure able to act immediately and respond to changing circumstances in order to work with local and international cultural operators.

As for the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, there is a consensus among the stakeholders interviewed that it was very effective in implementing the cultural programme. However, the overall oversight of the Foundation generated a somewhat more mixed set of views. In particular, the snap parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in 2014 were followed by several rounds of cabinet reshuffle, including three changes of Ministers of Culture. In addition, two rounds of local elections took place in Plovdiv in 2015 and in 2019, which led to changes in key personnel in the Board of Directors during the preparation phase and the title year. Throughout the preparation and implementation phases, the Board of Directors insisted on closely monitoring the activities of the Foundation through weekly meetings and regular reporting, which added to the workload and delayed procedures within the executive team.

The EU-level selection procedure ensured the designation of two ECOC that were relevant to the objectives at EU level and that had the potential to achieve the intended effects. The procedure ensured healthy competition in both countries, with a record number of 21 bidding cities in Italy and a high number (i.e. eight) of cities competing for the first ever ECOC title in Bulgaria.

Finally, the EU-level monitoring procedure, with formal and informal monitoring meetings as well as in situ visits with the panel, has proven a very valuable process in giving impartial and professional advice and support to the two ECOC from highly experienced experts, some of whom have implemented previous ECOC and encountered difficulties similar to the ones faced by Matera and Plovdiv.

4.3. Effectiveness

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the ECOC in achieving the objectives set for them (at EU level and local level) can only be determined in the long-run. That being said, the final report of the contract supporting the evaluation shows that the two ECOC 2019 presented cultural programmes that were more extensive, diverse, innovative and international compared to the baseline cultural offering in previous years.

In total, the ECOC cultural programme in Matera was ambitious in its scale and focus. It featured more than 1,300 events of various sizes and formats, representing a whole range of cultural disciplines, ranging from opera to circus shows, from workshops on digital tools to exhibitions focusing on traditions and cultural heritage elements of the local community, with many of them having a strong co-design and co-creation component. It is estimated that 80% of these events were original creations. This diversity was stressed by the respondents of the Foundation's survey, where the majority reported satisfaction with the content, quality, and originality of the cultural programme (64%) and with the diversity of the cultural offer (66%). Moreover, a large majority of respondents believed that Matera is now more culturally vibrant (78%), more culturally diversified (65%) and more open to cultural differences and diversity more in general (82%).

In Plovdiv, despite the decrease in the overall operational budget for the ECOC 2019 project, a total of 513 cultural events took place during the title year. Some of the highlights in the ECOC programme were large-scale, ambitious productions, which were praised by audiences and critics, and received several artistic awards. On top of that, 54 ECOC related events were held in other cities in Bulgaria and abroad, which was – in the opinion of the evaluator – a very interesting way to disseminate and increase the visibility of the ECOC 2019 beyond the city and its surrounding region. To achieve this in a challenging financial context, the Foundation proceeded to a costs re-evaluation for each project and – for the projects resulting from open calls – transferred the responsibility for attracting sponsors to applicants through the requirement for self-financing. Compared to previous years, the content of the cultural programme was also very diverse and ranged from standard art forms like gallery and museum exhibitions, music festivals and street art to more innovative content such as ecological interventions and co-creation initiatives with disadvantaged groups. The general view is that the ECOC project mainly benefitted the city's larger, well-established cultural operators such as the State Opera, the Drama Theatre and the State Puppet Theatre, but it was also instrumental in shedding light on a number of emerging young artists and smaller scale organisations.

As described below, both ECOC helped widen access to and participation in culture. Both ECOC also helped strengthen the cultural capacity of their cultural and creative sectors as well as their links with other sectors. Finally, both ECOC widened access to and participation in culture during 2019.

Effectiveness in delivering a cultural programme with a European dimension

The Matera cultural programme was of the scale and quality proposed in the original application and had a genuine European dimension. According to the evaluation, the ECOC project has been successful in contributing to making the cultural offering of Matera more European. Indeed, as already mentioned above, the cultural programme featured performances by a diversity of international artists and exhibitions of international works, strengthened European networks and connections, European co-productions and residencies by European artists.

The performance of Plovdiv in this respect is also good, as 80 events with a cross-border dimension took place in 2019, which is four times higher than the number of such events

during the baseline year 2017. Over 130 partnerships with creative organisations and artists from Europe were established over the ECOC year. Plovdiv also stimulated the European dimension through cross-border collaborations on topics of European importance and the active involvement of the EUNIC[27] members in the country.

These endeavours and activities in both cities have contributed to reinforcing the transnational functioning of the local cultural community, with also scope for continuity after the title-year.

Effectiveness in reaching and engaging with local citizens, in targeting specific groups and in strengthening the local cultural and creative sectors

Both ECOC widened access to and participation in culture during 2019.

In Matera, 65% of the 1,300 events of the programme were completely free and the remaining (about 450) were accessible with the purchase of the Matera 2019 Passport[28]. Free events managed to gather about 350,000 people, while events accessible with the Passport were attended by over 140,000 participants. Flagship events included the opening ceremony with an attendance estimated at 60,000 people or the Ars Excavandi exhibition[29] with more than 17,500 visitors. According to the evaluator, such figures can be seen as a positive outcome, as the citizens of Matera were not used to having such a wide cultural offer in their city (which is further reflected in the lack of theatres or venues that could host large exhibitions prior to the ECOC year).

The involvement of young people was also quite important, as approximately 30,000 students were involved in projects realised in collaboration with local and national schools, as a result of an active collaboration between the Matera 2019 Foundation and the Italian Ministry for Education. Finally, almost 600 volunteers (out of the 1,500 registered) took an active part in Matera 2019. It is worth noticing that about 95% of those volunteers who responded to a survey carried out by the Foundation[30] said they were satisfied with their participation in the ECOC project and recognised personal growth in relation to relation to the interaction with citizens, teamwork or self-confidence.

Perhaps equally impressive is the fact that according to estimations, about 57,000 citizens were directly involved in cultural productions. The co-creation process and the capacity building programme put in place by the Foundation, bringing together cultural operators, citizens and volunteers, gave citizens the opportunity to contribute to about 70% of the cultural programme of Matera 2019.

As far as Plovdiv 2019 is concerned, the cultural programme attracted high attendance levels, with 1,528,432 people attending ECOC events in Plovdiv and the wider South Central region in 2019. Out this total, 80% were national visitors, 11% were residents of Plovdiv and about 9% were international visitors. The share of those who visit relatively

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27 EUNIC stands for "European Union National Institutes for Culture". It is a European network of organisations engaging in cultural relations from all EU member states.

28 The Passport was a unique ticket giving access to the whole panorama of cultural activities taking place in the context of Matera 2019. Some 74,000 passports were sold.

29 Under the "Utopias and Dystopias", it looked at the history and culture of subterranean architecture from the Palaeolithic period to the present and towards the future.

30 A total of 172 answers were collected.

often cultural events in Plovdiv has increased from 27% in 2017 to 44% in 2019 while respectively 60% of the city residents and 32% of the wider region's residents have attended at least one cultural event in the title-year (against targets of respectively 50% and 30%)[31].

The social dimension of certain projects made culture accessible for social groups that previously were not active participants in the cultural life. These groups include the young people from deprived neighbourhoods and elderly people from smaller towns and villages in the wider Plovdiv region, as already illustrated above. There was also a strong focus on the Roma community (Stolipinovo being the largest Roma district in the Balkans with a population of about 80,000 people). A total of 61 events took place in this district, throughout the ECOC year, compared to just 10 events in the baseline year 2017. A good example of enhanced participation, widely regarded as one of the most successful projects within Plovdiv 2019, was Medea[32], a theatre performance in which children from the Roma, Turkish, Jewish and Armenian ethnicities in Plovdiv participated as actors. The three-year long rehearsal process included a series of training sessions and art workshops for 75 children in Plovdiv and culminated in a large-scale, open-air performance at the Ancient Theatre in June 2019 with an audience of 1,753 people.

Finally, Plovdiv 2019 also counted on the active involvement of volunteers, with 400 people volunteering over the ECOC year and over 2,000 people being engaged in volunteering activities over the entire period of the initiative.

Both ECOC also helped strengthen the cultural capacity of the local cultural and creative sectors and their links with other sectors.

As far as Matera is concerned, one of the challenges identified at the bidding stage was the lack of cultural infrastructure. The ECOC project was instrumental in mapping about 400 venues and spaces that could be used for cultural events as well as launching and driving the process for the renovation of a historic location abandoned until recently, and its repurposing into a multifunctional space. Activities were also implemented to help local cultural operators developing new skills and strengthening their ability to seek partnerships and operate internationally[33].

In Plovdiv, the local cultural capacity was also reinforced by an improved cultural infrastructure, most notably in the Kapana Creative District[34], which was a flagship project of Plovdiv 2019 and has turned into one of the most recognisable city landmarks, attracting citizens and tourists alike. In the period from 2014 to 2019, and as a result of annual thematic open calls launched by the Foundation with the view to developing and supporting creative spaces in the district, more than 60 projects were implemented and over 300 events took place in Kapana. Furthermore, the Foundation implemented FORUM 2019, a flagship project and an educational platform aimed at creating partnership networks, capacity building and audience development, in order to ensure the

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31 These are monitoring data collected by the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation.

32 https://plovdiv2019.eu/en/platform/fuse/121-mahala/482-medea

33 In particular, about 27 project leaders and 40 cultural operators (defined as 'makers' and 'linkers') participated in 'Build-up' activities, among which was a 10-day workshop covering topics ranging from effective collaboration to overcoming State assistance dependency, entrepreneurship and setting up international networking.

34 https://plovdiv2019.eu/en/platform/transforms/130-urban-dreams/418-kapana-creative-district

smooth realisation of the ECOC. Throughout the five-year period of implementation, 60 workshops and training events took place, covering a variety of themes and topics, with a total of 4,900 participants.

Effectiveness in reaching out to European and international audiences

According to the evaluation, the ECOC raised the international profile of both 2019 title-holding cities.

As far as Matera is concerned, it appears that the Foundation implemented a solid communication and marketing strategy with emphasis on digital communication, and that the approach developed to reach local, national and international audiences positively contributed to raising awareness and informing all relevant audiences of the ECOC programme and its different initiatives. Key stakeholders interviewed also underlined the development of a digital team at an early stage (i.e. in 2013, before the city even got the title) and the role of the digital volunteers (over 100 in 2019) as key success factors in this respect. On a more traditional note, a specific partnership with Euronews[35], resulting in a series of 10 episodes on Matera 2019, also contributed to increasing the awareness of the ECOC year. All in all, 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.

Unfortunately, no data on the overall attendance of foreign people in the ECOC events have been collected. However, in the period between 2012 and 2019, the Basilicata region experienced a higher increase in the number of tourists than the rest of Italy, from about 520,000 tourists in 2012 to almost 950,000 in 2019. A survey conducted among some 1,743 tourists in 2019 shows that for almost 70% of the respondents, Matera hosting the ECOC impacted on their decision to visit the city.

The evidence suggests that Plovdiv 2019 achieved significant results related to raising the international profile of the city in two main directions, namely stimulating the tourism sector and attracting unprecedented international media attention. While the share of Bulgarians visiting Plovdiv per year increased from 28% in 2015 to over 39% in the title year, the number of international tourists rose by 27% from 2015 to 2019 to reach a total of 121,478 people[36]. However, as the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria tracks only tourist accommodation establishments with 10 and more bed places, this figure is only a rough estimation.

The ECOC also succeeded in creating an unprecedented international media coverage. In the period from 2017 to 2019, over 800 publications appeared in international media, among which CNN Travel, Lonely Planet, The New York Times, Euronews (with promotional videos in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, Hungarian and Russian languages), La Repubblica, Daily Telegraph, Deutsche Welle, RAI TV, France-Presse, Reuters, TASS, the Chinese agency Xinhua, Associated Press, and many more. The large number of travel related articles helped raise the visibility and attractiveness of the city for international tourists. For example, Plovdiv was named one

[35] Complemented with important partnerships with the national radiobroadcaster RAI Radio 3 and a regional TV channel.

[36] Monitoring data from the Foundation.

of CNN Travel's best places to visit in 2019[37] whereas, in celebration of the ECOC 2019, National Geographic featured a six-series documentary film dedicated to Plovdiv[38].

Effectiveness in ensuring sustainability.

Positive impacts are also expected with regard to the legacy of the ECOC in both cities, as significant efforts were to keep the momentum going after 2019.

From the very start, Matera 2019 intended to start a process of renovation and cultural change of the city and the local community that would last well beyond 2019. It was planned that the Foundation would carry on its activities for two years after the ECOC year, becoming a co-creation platform, and a budget has been allocated to this, though the legacy plans were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak.

As far as Plovdiv is concerned, it is the view of the evaluator that a positive aspect related to ensuring the legacy of the initiative, which sets Plovdiv apart from most other ECOC cities, was the decision of the Foundation to reserve funding from the Melina Mercouri Prize for projects in the years following the title. At the end of 2019 and, again, at the end of 2020, two "legacy" open calls were published, which were aimed at sustainable development of cultural initiatives and events in the city and intended to provide a continuation of the positive changes brought by the ECOC. However, as in Matera, there is a considerable degree of uncertainty surrounding the implementation of approved projects due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4. Coherence

The ECOC Action is coherent and complementary to the Creative Europe Programme in that it promotes the objectives of Creative Europe and is distinct from the other activities supported by the programme. Plovdiv was involved in the Creative Europe-funded project, European Academy of Outdoor Arts School of Spectacle, with leading organization Walk the Plank (UK), Pafos ECOC 2017 (Cyprus), a partner from Kaunas (Lithuania) and two from Limerick (Ireland) aiming to give creative practitioners from Bulgaria and abroad a better understanding of the creative possibilities of outdoor art celebrations, gaining skills in production, sound, performance, 3D mapping and site decoration.

The ECOC Action is also complementary to other EU programmes. As an example, Matera 2019 is the coordinator of an Erasmus+ project named DeuS (European Open Design School for Sustainable Regional Development). In collaboration with other partners from eight other countries, the project aims to co-create a European-wide learning and training approach in design, critical thinking and entrepreneurship to find participatory, creative and cost-effective solutions to local challenges, by unlocking the potential of the cultural and creative sectors[39].

The ECOC Action is also coherent with and complementary to the European Cohesion Policy Funds, depending on the context of each city holding the title. 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

37 https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/places-to-visit-2019/index.html

38 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4Caj7Mvrno

39 DeuS. Official website. Accessed from: https://www.deuscci.eu/

bringing together key lessons and practices experienced in different European contexts related to reducing light pollution. This Interreg project was connected to two other events of the Matera 2019 cultural programme, namely Social Lights and Onda, which were built around the preservation of the night sky and astronomy.

4.5. EU added value

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

The designation of Matera and Plovdiv as ECOC attracted benefits that would have been unlikely to arise to the same extent in the absence of the Action. Indeed, the evidence presented in the chapters above suggest that the ECOC, as an EU initiative and an EU brand, provides the stimulus for stakeholders to commit resources and effort to a shared vision and collaborative programme at a much greater scale than would otherwise happen. The EU value added consists largely in the force of the 'brand' itself to act as a significant generator of interest from stakeholders not only from the city and but also from far beyond.

This is evidenced, for example, by the creation of dedicated organisations to implement the ECOC and the allocation of resources that are additional to the “mainstream” funding for cultural activities in the cities and regions concerned.

More particularly, the internationalisation of the activities and the wide horizon of the programmes in both cities would have been of much lower scale if it had been a national action. Also, the European nature of the action represented the stimulus for the title cities to look for partnerships abroad and, most importantly, it acted as a link with other EU initiatives and cities.

Regarding the visibility of the EU, both title-holders gave full prominence to the title of “European Capital of Culture” in their communication and promotional materials and gave prominence to the fact that the ECOC is an EU Action.

The results consistently achieved by the Action through the years make sure that its models and mechanisms – for example in terms of building a solid governance for the delivery of the ECOC, increasing the capacity of local cultural organizations or attracting projects' ideas from local residents – can be applied not only within one individual Member State that has its administrative and cultural specificities but in any Member States, finally confirming its EU added value.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Commission concludes that the ex post evaluation of the two ECOC 2019 confirms what already emerged from all previous twelve yearly ECOC evaluation exercises, i.e. that the ECOC Action is highly valued by the hosting cities, which can obtain positive impacts during the development and implementation of their title years. The action also remains relevant at EU level.

The Commission also concludes that the programmes implemented by the two 2019 title-holders were consistent with the objectives of the ECOC Action:

- They reflected its European dimension: as an example, in Matera 45% out of the total number of artists and project leaders involved by the Matera 2019 Foundation, were international and over 1,000 international mobility programmes were realised with 55 different countries. In Plovdiv, 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;

- They involved local residents and stakeholders: in Matera, about 57,000 citizens were directly involved in cultural productions through an unprecedented co-creation process whilst in Plovdiv, 60% of the city's residents and 32% of the wider region's residents have attended at least one cultural event in the title-year;
- They widened access to and participation in culture during 2019: in Plovdiv, stimulating access and participation in cultural events was a strong element of the ECOC project as reflected in high attendance levels (with a total of 1,528,432 people); in Matera, audiences reached 500,000 people (in line with the expectations) and the ECOC was successful in providing new opportunities for citizens to be involved as creators, performers and audiences;
- They also helped strengthen the cultural capacity of the local community and/or cultural and creative sectors and their links with other sectors: for example, 4,900 participants took place in the educational platform run by the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation during its five years of implementation while in Matera, suffering a lack of cultural infrastructures, the ECOC project was instrumental in mapping about 400 venues and spaces that could be used for cultural events;
- The ECOC raised the international profile of both cities: In Plovdiv, about 9% of people attending ECOC related events were international visitors whilst 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;
- Both ECOC-years may lead to legacies both physical (in the form of new or refurbished cultural and logistic infrastructures) and intangible (for example through the new skills developed by the high number of local people who actively developed cultural projects in Matera or participated in capacity-building activities in Plovdiv).

However, as was the case with all previous ex post evaluations of the ECOC Action, the current evaluation – because it comes too early after the implementation of the ECOC year in accordance with Article 12 of Decision No 1622/2006/EC – cannot assess the long-term impacts of the two ECOC 2018. As already mentioned in the staff-working document accompanying its report on the ECOC 2018, the intention of the Commission is to address this shortcoming to analyse such impacts in the frame of the evaluation exercise foreseen in Article 16 of Decision No 2014/445/EU.

ANNEX 1: PROCEDURAL INFORMATION

1. LEAD DG, DECIDE PLANNING/CWP REFERENCES

The evaluation was led by the European Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). It is included in the Work Programme of Creative Europe for 2019 and in the Agenda Planning with the reference PLAN/2019/5483.

2. ORGANISATION AND TIMING

The evaluation was supported by an external and independent evaluator, under a service contract. The service contract was implemented via a Framework Contract with reopening of competition and in accordance to the Financial Rules Applicable to the General Budget of the Union[40] and its Rules of Application[41].

The evaluation roadmap was adopted on 27 May 2019[42].

According to the roadmap, a Steering Committee including staff representatives from the European Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Directorate General for Communication and Secretariat General was established in May 2019. The Steering Committee met in four occasions: to prepare the Terms of Reference, to kick off the evaluation, to approve the Inception Report and to discuss the draft final report. Extensive correspondence between the Steering Committee members was held in between the meetings to follow-up on the evaluation.

3. EXCEPTION TO THE BETTER REGULATION GUIDELINES

The only exception is that the evaluation does not include a wider public consultation. As explained in the Roadmap, the ECOC Action is considered to be local. International participation is scattered within and outside Europe and is difficult to reach. On the other hand the opinions would be based on attendance to specific events and would not give useful insights for the evaluation of the ECOC Action as a whole.

4. EVIDENCE, SOURCES AND QUALITY

The 2019 evaluation of the ECOC used a series of data sets to inform its findings. The main ones being:

- Interviews with over 60 stakeholders directly and indirectly involved in the planning, operation and delivery of the two ECOC programmes;
- A literature review of ECOC and European level information on the two ECOC including application/bid information, reports, cultural programme brochures, web sites and news articles. The ECOC's own external evaluations have also been

[40] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02012R0966-20160101&from=EN

[41] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02012R1268-20160101&from=EN

[42] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2019-3143701_en

used to inform the European evaluation process providing access, among others, to the results of wide consultation activities;

- Together, the above evidence base provides the evaluation with a valid and rounded set of data to inform the views on the main aspects of the ECOC evaluation including efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and relevance. This view has been informed by:
  - The scale of the consultation exercise. Around 60 individuals have fed their views and opinions into the evaluation process through telephone interviews/ video conference;
  - The nature of the consultation exercise. The evaluators were keen to consult with those who had a more indirect and external view of the two ECOC. These stakeholders included journalists, local authorities, representatives of the business sector, those not directly benefitting from the ECOC (e.g. rejected projects) as well as those working in the wider cultural policy agenda at regional and city level. Furthermore, the evaluators consulted organisations representing local communities and minorities (i.e. Roma, LGBT NGOs , etc.). This ensures the evaluation is not simply based on those who benefitted the most from the ECOC;
  - Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data collected through primary and secondary research.

ANNEX 2: STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

The stakeholders were consulted via targeted consultations (phone interviews).

The consultations included the teams responsible for the implementation of the ECOC in both cities, the political stakeholders involved in the project, the projects participating in the programme or having submitted proposals to participate that were rejected, as well as personalities attached to the cultural tissue in both cities and stakeholders at EU level. The objective of the consultations was to have evidence supporting the findings and conclusions of the evaluation.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in late February-early March, the methodology was revised and initially planned visits to both cities did not take place and face-to-face interviews were replaced by remote ones and online meetings with stakeholders. As agreed with the Steering Committee, for safety reasons interviews were conducted over the telephone, Skype or Microsoft Teams.

The interview lists in Matera and Plovdiv, as well as the topic guides for the various types of interviews can be found in the Annexes 1 and 2 of the report produced by the experts assisting the Commission[43]. The list of stakeholders consulted was partly developed by the ECOC delivery teams but also through an internet search for relevant stakeholders.

For the reasons already mentioned in Chapter 4 of the staff-working document and in Annex 1, no open public consultation was conducted in the framework of the evaluation exercise. The consultation was restricted to relevant stakeholders in the two cities hosting the title. The characteristics of the Action and the scope of the evaluation do not make it necessary to extend the consultation to a wider public (as indicated in the roadmap published).

Annex 3 details the evaluation questions for which the stakeholders' consultation was used. These regard mainly the questions which answers are not based on factual data. The stakeholders' consultation was particularly useful to find information about the impact of the ECOC in the cultural offer of the city, the participation of citizens and local cultural operators, the building of capacity for local cultural operators and legacy prospects.

[43] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6312a17a-1b6a-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

ANNEX 3: METHODS AND ANALYTICAL MODELS

The figure below presents the overview of the methodology. A more detailed overview of the methodology and sources used for each of the evaluation questions is presented in the subsequent tables and text.

1. Overview of methodology and tasks of the evaluation:

Inception phase

Task 1: Kick-off meeting

Task 2: Initial consultations

Task 3: Desk research

Task 4: Inception Report

Main Research phase

Task 5: Visits to the ECOC cities

Task 6: On-line survey of project

Analysis and reporting phase

Task 7: Interim Report

Task 8: Factual check of the city reports

Task 9: Final report

Table 1.1 Evaluation questions: Relevance, EU added value and coherence

Evaluation Question	Literature reviews	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
EQ1: To what extent are the objectives of the ECOC Action?	**Y**		**Y**	**Y**		**Y**	**Y**
What was the main motivation behind the city bidding to become a European Capital of Culture?	**Y**		**Y**	**Y**		**Y**	**Y**

Evaluation Question	Literature reviews	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
What was the process of determining objectives? Was there a process of consultation in each city to define aims and objectives?			Y	Y		Y	Y
What were the objectives of the city in being ECOC? What was the relative importance of each objective?	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
To what extent were the objectives consistent with the Decision and with the ECOC's own application? (special focus on the European dimension)	Y		Y	Y			Y
Have any specific objectives of the ECOC event been related to social impacts?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
In this connection, did the objectives of the ECOC event include reaching out to all groups of society, including the excluded, disadvantaged, disabled people and minorities?	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y
EQ2: To what extent were the ECOC's cultural programmes and associated activities relevant to their own objectives?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
To what extent were the activities consistent with the ECOC's own objectives? (special focus on the European dimension)	Y			Y	Y	Y	Y
To what extent have the specific themes/orientations of the cultural programme proved to be relevant to the objectives defined?			Y	Y	Y		Y
How was the European dimension reflected by the themes put forward by the ECOC event and in terms of cooperation at European level? How did the Capitals of Culture seek to make the European dimension visible? To what extent did the two ECOC cooperate?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Table 1.2 Evaluation questions: Effectiveness

Evaluation Question	Literature reviews	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
EQ3: To what extent were the EU-level objectives achieved?	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**
Provide typology of outputs, results and possible impacts of the Action at different levels (European, national, regional etc.)	Y		Y	Y	Y		Y
To what extent has the ECOC event been successful in attaining the objectives of the Action (refer to list in the intervention logic)?	Y		Y	Y			Y
Was the cultural programme perceived as being of high artistic quality? To what extent did the ECOC prove successful in bringing their chosen artistic themes/orientations to the fore?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
To what extent did the ECOC title contribute to an enhanced cultural offer in the cities holding the title (e.g. in terms of scope and scale) with stronger European dimension?	Y	Y	Y	Y			
To what extent did the ECOC implementation widen access to and participation in culture in the two cities? What actions were taking to include the elderly, young people, people with special needs in the cultural activities? How accessible were the activities carried out?	Y	Y					Y
How did the ECOC programmes help strengthening the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors and its links with other sectors? Which help was available to cultural operators to extend their networks and work transnationally and internationally?	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
To what extent did the Action in the two cities raise their international profile through culture?		Y	Y	Y		Y	Y
EQ4: To what extent were the cities' own objectives achieved?		**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**

Evaluation Question	Literature reviews	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
What quantitative indicators (number of visitors, overnight stays, cultural participation of people, etc.) of the social, tourist and broader economic impacts of the event have been gathered by the ECOC?		Y	Y	Y	Y		
To what extent did the ECOC achieve the outputs hoped for by the city and as set out in the application?	Y	Y	Y			Y	Y
To what extent have specific objectives related to social impacts been met?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
To what extent were the objectives related to reaching out to all groups of society, including the excluded, disadvantaged, disabled and minorities, met?		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
EQ5: To what extent has the Action resulted in unintended effects?		**Y**	**Y**	**Y**			**Y**
Are there any instances where the ECOC event has exceeded initial expectations? What positive effects has this had?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Where expectations have not been met, what factors have hindered the development of the Action?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Have any other unintended effects been identified?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
EQ6: To what extent can the positive effects of the ECOC Action be considered to be sustainable?			**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**
Which of the activities or elements of the ECOC event are likely to continue and in which form once the ECOC-year is over?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Has any provision been made to continue and follow up the cultural programme of the ECOC event after the closure?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
How will the city continue to manage its long-term cultural development following the ECOC event?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
What will be the role of the operational structure after the end of the ECOC event and how will the organizational structure change?			*Y*	*Y*		*Y*	

Evaluation Question	Literature reviews	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
What has been the contribution of the ECOC event to improved management of cultural development in the city? (in the medium-term)			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
What are the impacts of the ECOC event likely to be on the long term cultural development of the city?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
What are the impacts of the ECOC event likely to be on the long term social development of the city?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
What are the impacts of the ECOC event likely to be on the long term urban and broader economic development of the city?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Table 1.3 Evaluation questions: Efficiency

EQ7: How did the management arrangements of each ECOC contribute to the achievement of outputs, results and impacts?	Literature reviews	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
How have the organizational models of the formal governing Board and operational structures played a role in the European Capital of Culture? What role have the Board and operational structures played in the ECOC event's implementation? At what stage were these structures established? How did it improve management of culture in the city during the event?			Y	Y			Y
Who chaired the Board and what was his/her experience? What were the key success and failure elements related to the work of the Board and operational structure used and personnel involved?	Y		Y	Y			
Has an artistic director been included into the operational structure and how was he/she appointed? What were the key success and failure elements related to the work of the artistic director and personnel involved?	Y		Y	Y			
What was the process of designing the programme?	Y		Y	Y	Y		Y

How were activities selected and implemented?			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
How did the delivery mechanism contribute to the achievement of outputs?			Y	Y			Y
To what extent has the communication and promotion strategy been successful in/contributed to the promotion of city image/profile, promotion of the ECOC event, awareness-raising of the European dimension, promotion of all events and attractions in the city?	Y		Y	Y	Y		Y
To what extent has the communication and promotion strategy including the use of social media successfully reached the communication's target groups at local, regional, national, European and international levels?			Y	Y			Y

Evaluation Question	Literature review	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
EQ8: To what extent were the selection, monitoring and EU co-financing procedures, introduced by Decision 2006/1622/2006/EC efficient?	⌟						
To what extent have the mechanisms applied by the Commission in line with Decision 2006/1622/EC for the selection of the European Capitals of Culture and the subsequent implementation and monitoring mechanisms influenced the results of the ECOC event?			Y	Y			
To what extent has the informal meeting following the designation as well as other advice offered by the panel and by the Commission influenced the results of the ECOC event?			*Y*	*Y*			*Y*
How was the Melina Mercouri Prize used?			Y				
EQ9: To what extent did the ECOC manage to raise the necessary resources?	**Y**		**Y**	**Y**	**Y**		**Y**

Evaluation Question	Literature review	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
What was the process of securing the financial inputs?			Y	Y	Y		Y
What was the total amount of resources used for each ECOC event? What was the final financial outturn of the year?	Y	Y	Y				
What were the sources of financing and the respective importance of their contribution to the total? How much came from the European Union Structural Funds (e.g. ERDF - European Regional Development Fund, ESF – European Social Fund) or other sources of EU funding?	Y		Y	Y			Y
To what extent did the ECOC title trigger complementary sponsorship?			Y	Y			Y
What was the total expenditure strictly for the implementation of the cultural programme of the year (operational expenditure)? What was the proportion of the operational expenditure in the total expenditure for the ECOC event?	Y		Y				Y
What proportion of expenditure was used for infrastructure (cultural and tourism infrastructure, including renovation)**?**	Y		Y				Y
EQ10: To what extent were the financial and human resources secured by each ECOC appropriate and proportionate?	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**				**Y**
Was the total size of the budget sufficient for reaching a critical mass in terms of impacts? Could the same results have been achieved with less funding? Could the same results have been achieved if the structure of resources and their respective importance was different?			Y	Y	Y		Y
To what extent have the human resources deployed for preparation and implementation of the ECOC event been commensurate with its intended outputs and outcomes?	Y		Y				Y

Evaluation Question	Literature review	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
As a result, could the total budget for the ECOC event be considered appropriate and proportional to what the each ECOC set out to achieve?			Y				Y

Table 1.4 Evaluation Questions: Coherence

Evaluation Question	Literature review	Quantitative Data analysis	Interviews with delivery teams	Stakeholder consultations	Survey of projects	Project interviews	Analysis
EQ11: To what extent were the ECOC complementary to other EU initiatives?	**Y**		**Y**	**Y**	**Y**		**Y**
As far as the conclusions made for the two cities allows it, to what extent has the Action proved to be complementary to other EU initiatives in the field of culture?	Y		Y	Y	Y		Y
To what extent has each ECOC been reinforced by and added impetus to investments by the EU Structural Funds?	Y		Y	Y			Y
To what extent have the two ECOC complemented other EU initiatives, e.g. European Year of Cultural Heritage?	Y		Y	Y			Y
EQ12: What is the EU added value and the visibility of the ECOC Action?	**Y**		**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	**Y**
As far as the conclusions made for the two cities allow, what is the added value of the European Capital of Culture being an EU initiative, compared to what could be achieved if the Action was a purely national or local action?	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Was the fact that this is a European Union action sufficiently communicated by the cities?	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
To what extent were the general public and the cultural operators aware of this fact?	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

2. Details of the relevant evaluation tasks and methodologies:

Inception phase

The aim of the inception phase was to finalise the evaluation framework and research tools, address the project steering group's comments regarding the proposed method and collect background information on the two 2019 host cities.

Initial consultations

The task consisted in talking to each of the two ECOC, getting evidence about the efficiency and effectiveness of processes at EU level, obtaining qualitative information on key issues for each ECOC to inform later research, identifying additional sources of data and additional interviewees at EU, local and national levels, as well as informing proposals on monitoring and evaluation arrangements. Discussion at the kick off meeting identified a need for strong triangulation and to gain opinions from a broader set of stakeholders.

Desk research

This involved collection and review of literature, primary data from the delivery agency and available secondary data, as well as web and social media statistics in order to develop a descriptive picture of each ECOC and serve as a source of evidence for later analysis. literature collected at the European level was reviewed and assessed to either understand the policy drivers at EU level which support the two ECOC 2019 or provide background on the bidding and application stages for both 2019 cities (i.e. little of it provides information useful for the content, delivery and impact of the two programmes). More academic literature at the EU level linked to the ECOC was also searched for. To complement the above desk research task the contractor assessed the extent to which each ECOC had used big data as well as analysed web and social media to increase visibility and interest in the ECOC among country residents and internationally. There was however no evidence of big data having been used by the Foundation or any of the other stakeholders in Matera and Plovdiv.

Visits to the cities

In agreement with the Commission, due to the COVID-19 outbreak the visits to Matera and Plovdiv did not take place. Instead, there were various rounds of online meetings and interviews with representatives of the Matera 2019 and Plovdiv 2019 Foundations, as well as with cultural operators and local stakeholders. The feedback provided by the interviewees also contributed to guide and tailor the desk research, by identifying relevant and additional sources of evidence on the main subjects of the evaluation. These interviews also sought to gather an in-depth understanding of the effect that ECOC had for the individuals involved, their organizations and the local culture sector as a whole. It finally allowed to ensure that findings were based on consensus across a range of target groups as well as to identify key differences in the experience of different stakeholders. In the case of projects, the criteria for inclusion focused on whether it represents good practice in relation to at least one of the key dimensions of the evaluation, including (but not limited to) increased European cooperation, the effective targeting of key groups of citizens or neighbourhoods, audience development strategies, or legacy effects.

Further interviews were conducted:

- with national and local media representatives in order to assess media strategies and impact on communication efforts;
- representatives of local commerce, including businesses in the tourism, hospitality and transport sectors as well as key commercial sponsors of ECOC.

The interviews with the delivery teams served four purposes: i) gathering further factual data and information about the cultural programme and its achievements; ii) identifying the "story" of the ECOC throughout its lifecycle, i.e. conception, application, development, delivery, legacy; iii) gaining a critical (albeit "insider") perspective on the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of the ECOC; iv) triangulating emerging findings, for example, those emerging from the desk research and project survey.

Interviews with other key stakeholders in the city (e.g. municipality, chamber of commerce, commercial sponsors, media representatives and cultural operators) were also essential to identifying the 'external' view of the ECOC by those who were involved in the urban or cultural agenda but were not necessarily involved in the direct delivery of the ECOC. As with the previous evaluations, such individuals offered an alternative and broader perspective on the ECOC. Indeed, the interviews allowed the evaluator to explore particular issues in more depth, for example, relating to the effectiveness of the governance structure, or the strength of artistic direction.

Analysis and reporting phase

Once all the information gathered, the experts fulfilled an analysis of the available information, drawing conclusions and triangulating data to ensure consistency and accuracy. The limitations of the data gathered have been explained in the report and in the staff-working document. After the first drafting exercise, the results were shared with the two ECOC for a factual check. Both the Matera and Plovdiv ECOC were asked to undertake a check on the completeness of data being used to address each evaluation topic. Their comments, where relevant, were included in the final report submitted by the contractor supporting the evaluation.