



European
Commission

Ex-post evaluation of the 2019 European Capitals of Culture – Executive summary

October 2020

*Tim Fox
Luca Mobilio
Assya Pavlova
Sergio Goffredo*

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate EAC.D – Culture and Creativity
Unit D.2 – Creative Europe
eac-culture@ec.europa.eu

European Commission

B-1049 Brussels

Ex-post evaluation of the 2019 European Capitals of Culture – Executive summary

October 2020

Edited by

Tim Fox

Luca Mobilio

Assya Pavlova

Sergio Goffredo

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However it only reflects the views of the authors and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Getting in touch with the EU

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11
(certain operators may charge for these calls),
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696 or
- by email via: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020

© European Union, 2020

Reuse is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

The reuse policy of European Commission documents is regulated by Decision 2011/833/EU (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39).

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the EU copyright, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) of the European Commission commissioned Ecorys in November 2019 to undertake the Ex-post Evaluation of the 2019 European Capitals of Culture (ECoC).

The ECoC Action safeguards and promotes the diversity of cultures in Europe, highlights the common features they share, and fosters the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities. In achieving these objectives, the ECoC Action is intended to help host cities to enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of their cultural offer, widen participation in culture among residents and strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector. The ECoC also aims to raise the international profile of host cities and help promote and celebrate different European cultures. The ECoC therefore aims to do more than 'put on a year of culture' and the benefits of hosting an ECoC reach further than those directly associated with the cultural sector.

Matera in Italy and Plovdiv in Bulgaria are the ECoC for 2019 that add to the 60 cities that previously held the ECoC title. By 2020, all 28 (original) Member States have hosted an ECoC. It is over 30 years since the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, put forward a European resolution to establish the European Capital of Culture in 1985 (the Action was originally called the European City of Culture).

This final report presents the findings of the ex-post evaluation of the ECoC Action for 2019, which was undertaken by Ecorys. The evaluation focussed on the two 2019 hosts, Matera (Italy) and Plovdiv (Bulgaria). It assessed the ways in which each city implemented their ECoC and the effects that have resulted. The report explains how Matera and Plovdiv developed their application, designed their cultural programmes and organised themselves to deliver their activities. The report also focusses on the benefits of hosting the title, as well as on legacy, challenges and lessons learned.

This evaluation is designed to satisfy the requirement of Decision 1622/2006/EC for an "external and independent evaluation of the results of the European Capital of Culture event of the previous year". Although each city has kept in regular contact with the Commission including through the provision of monitoring reports, the evaluation will help establish a more detailed understanding of the lifecycle of the ECoC, from its early inception through to its sustainability and legacy. In particular, the evaluation provides an opportunity to look back at the previous year in order to highlight lessons and recommendations based on the experiences of the host cities.

In order for results to be comparable with previous evaluations, the methodology follows a consistent approach for evidence gathering and analysis. The COVID-19 outbreak did not allow visiting the two cities; hence the methodology was adapted to face the challenges posed by the pandemic. Primary data sources include interviews conducted by telephone and other online survey tools. Interviews have gathered a variety of perspectives on each ECoC, including those of the management teams, decision-makers at local and national level, key cultural operators, partners involved in the delivery of ECoC and a sample of organisations participating in projects. Secondary data sources include the ECoC applications, studies and reports produced or commissioned by the ECoC, events programmes, promotional materials and websites, statistical data on

culture and tourism and quantitative data supplied by the ECoC on finance, activities, outputs and results.

Matera

Matera is a relatively small city of 60,000 inhabitants located in the Basilicata region of Southern Italy. It is the capital of the Province of Matera and is known as the "Città Sotterranea" (The Underground City). Today, Matera is known worldwide for its historical centre, known as "I Sassi". Inhabited since the Palaeolithic period, I Sassi was recognised, in 1993, as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, representing "an outstanding example of rock-cut settlement, adapted perfectly to its geomorphological setting and ecosystem", and also "an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble and landscape illustrating a number of significant stages in human history"¹.

Matera is a perfect **example of urban rebirth and regeneration**. Until the 1950s, Matera was affected by high levels of poverty and infant mortality rates, partly due to the uninhabitable conditions of the Sassi. In 1952, a state of emergency was proclaimed and in 1964 thousands of people were forcibly relocated from the Sassi to the newly erected neighbourhoods around the city. Today, most of the ancient centre has been restored and the caves now host hotels, b&bs, restaurants, cafés as well as cultural spaces such as theatres, museums and exhibiting spaces. These activities turned the city into a regional capital for leisure and culture and helped Matera establish itself as a destination for regional visitors.

The managing authority of the ECoC in Italy was the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism. The Ministry issued a call for submission of applications open to all Italian cities in November 2012 and received a record number of 21 applications. During the pre-selection meeting, held in Rome a year later, the panel recommended the ministry to invite six cities to the final stage, namely Cagliari, Lecce, Matera, Perugia, Ravenna and Siena. At the final selection meeting in October 2014, the panel recommended Matera for the title on the basis that it provided the best potential with and capacity for a successful ECoC in particular due the strong connection between the project and the city and regional development plans.

The decision to prepare an 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. In particular, the citizens of Matera had a strong impact on the final decision of the municipality to bid for the ECoC status and an organisation of citizens called AssociazioneMatera2019 was created to raise awareness on the opportunity such a status would bring among fellow citizens.

The ECoC application highlighted the importance of the cultural renovation process, not only for Matera, but for the entire South of Italy, within a period characterised by an economic and social decline. On this basis, the final cultural programme presented by Matera was named "**OpenFuture**" to represent "an opportunity to move towards openness in all of its multiple definitions: open, as in "accessible to all"; open, as in "freely available and unrestricted"; open, as in "not concealing one's thoughts or feelings"; open, as in "still admitting of debate".

¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/670>

The Matera-Basilicata Foundation 2019 was in charge of the governance of the Matera ECoC. After it was created in 2014, the Foundation went through an 'interrupted rhythm' of work, mainly due to the lack of continuity in local government resulting from the 2015 municipal elections. In particular, the political change at the municipal level had a significant impact on the design and development of the cultural programme, causing the put on hold of the Foundation's work for around a year and a half. This impasse was unblocked around the time of the first monitoring meeting in October 2016 in Brussels. Over time, the Foundation, originally established for the implementation of the cultural programme, also took additional tasks and responsibilities as the full management of the renovation of the site Cava del sole and the development of a wide communication strategy.

Despite the political instability that characterised part of Matera's ECoC experience, the Foundation could finally count on support at local, regional and national levels. The final budget for Matera 2019 was of €54.8 million, of which about 70% financed by the national government, around 25% by regional and local authorities and the remaining by the EU (Melina Mercouri Prize) and other sponsors. The final budget was generally consistent with the proposed budget of €52.3 million, with the only remarkable difference in the overall expenditure for administration costs (8.8 million instead of €6.4 million forecasted in the bidbook).

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". For these reasons, the cultural programme embraced three separate dimensions: the local dimension (Matera and Basilicata), the Southern dimension (addressing the cultural dimension of Italy's *meridione* as a whole) and the European dimension (engaging cultural operators on a pan-European scale). The cultural programme was organised around five different thematic lines:

- **Ancient Futures:** projects under this theme explored the relationship with nature and landscape. The activities under this strand tried to reconnect the visitors and citizens with experiences that have become unfamiliar in our cities, such as darkness, silence, solitude and isolation. Moreover, the activities explored the beauty of mathematics and the endless possibilities of remote futures;
- **Continuity and disruptions:** projects under this theme offered an opportunity for a process of collective therapy aimed at understanding how to collectively give shape to our cities and how to find beauty in the spaces inhabited on a daily basis;
- **Utopias and dystopias:** projects under this theme tested new radical social models through a series of games and urban/rural sports that transformed Matera in a playground aimed at changing attitudes and mentality;
- **Roots and routes:** building from the local tradition of 'transumanza' (annual ritual herding of the cows), the activities under this strand focused on mobility and explored the culture of mobility that brings together European citizens;

- **Reflections and connections:** storytelling, cinematic narratives and oral histories were the main activities under this theme, which aimed at re-examining identity and providing citizenship with a new model of 'everyday life' based on art, science and the widespread practice of cultural citizenship.

Two flagship projects were at the heart of the programme and explored across these five overarching themes. The **I-DEA (Institute of Demo-Ethno-Anthropological Archive) project** aimed to digitize the existing archives of the Basilicata region and make them publicly available and easily accessible for all. The archive collected a large number of public documents, but also material from private collections and cultural associations and oral memories from the city and the region, which contributed to document the cultural aspects of the region, such as the rituals, festivals, dialects, gastronomy and other aspects of Basilicata's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The **Open Design School** was 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 aim of this open school was to transform Matera and Basilicata into an area of radical innovation in the arts, science and technologies, due to its focus on learning and experimenting without strict hierarchies, where everyone learns from the other. In addition to this, the School also worked as a laboratory where citizens and cultural operators could design and develop stage settings and other materials used for the implementation of the cultural programme.

In addition, a large number of events were also organised, such as four large thematic exhibitions, 40 international meetings and summer schools and 62 original productions. In particular, the main exhibitions were:

- The **Ars Excavandi exhibition**, which combined a contemporary look at the history and culture of subterranean architecture from the Palaeolithic period to the present and towards the future. It took place at renovated Museo Ridola and was combined with a visit to the hypogeum of the Palazzo Lanfranchi museum, usually not accessible and especially set up for visits during the first period of the ECoC year;
- The **Re-reading Renaissance exhibition**, which brought visitors onto a journey through the artistic past of the two neighbouring regions of Apulia and Basilicata and proposed a renewed and less Tuscany-centred perspective on the Italian and European Renaissance;
- The **Anthropocene Observatory exhibition**, which combined film, photography, documentation, interviews, spatial analysis and fieldwork to explore spaces of continuity (from Helocene settlements to contemporary explorations of Earth-Observation science);
- The **Poetry of primes exhibition** at the archaeological museum of the ancient city of Metaponto, which explored the centrality of mathematics in the work of artists throughout ages.

Ultimately, more than 1,300 events and projects were implemented in 2019, 80% of which consisting in original creations and about 35% of the original productions

managed and implemented by local cultural operators. The latter had been at the centre of a number of capacity building activities. About 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. The '**Go&See**' action initiative 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, contributing setting up new networks and collaboration opportunities with European artists.

Citizens also played a central role in Matera 2019 with more than 80% of the projects actively engaging citizens' participation for a total of almost 60,000 local citizens involved. On top of this wide participation, about 600 volunteers supported the implementation of the Matera 2019 and more than 30,000 students were involved through various ad hoc projects. The involvement of citizens was spontaneous, and the support provided varied substantially according to the preferences and needs of the citizens involved and of the cultural activities. For instance, while some projects featured citizens as actors, dancers or singers, some other activities required the involvement of local people for the preparation of stage settings, hosting international artists or preparing meals.

Reaching out to a wider audience and allowing citizens to experience culture in new ways were the goals that Matera 2019 tried to achieve through the introduction of the **Matera 2019 Passport**. The passport was a unique ticket giving access to about 450 cultural activities taking place in the context of Matera 2019 (about 35% of the total number of activities). Some 74,000 passports were sold, and the Foundation estimated that almost 500,000 people attended at least one event (including the opening ceremony). Free events managed to gather about 350,000 people, while events accessible with the Passport were attended by over 140,000 participants.

The lack of available **cultural infrastructure** was one of the key challenges that was faced in the development and implementation of Matera 2019. The city lacked spaces and structures that could host larger events (even today, the city lacks a theatre). In order to cope with this, the Foundation mapped available sites in the city and the region, listing about 400 venues and spaces that could be used for cultural events. Moreover, the Foundation also managed the restoration and repurposing of the scenic **Cava del Sole**, an abandoned historic location near Matera, converting it into a multifunctional area. Cava del Sole features an auditorium able to host up to 1,000 attendees, an open-air arena for 7,000 attendees and a number of other facilities for cultural and creative activities. Cava del Sole was inaugurated in January 2019.

Over the period leading to the ECoC year, the **cultural sector** in Matera experienced an above-average growth both in terms of number of companies (+42%), number of people employed (+46%) and, above all, average size of companies in the sector (+12%).

Matera 2019 could count on a **diversified and global reaching communication strategy**. A mix of social media, local and regional television, national radio coverage

and a partnership with Euronews made it possible to reach out to local, national, and international audience. Euronews broadcasted 10 different episodes on Matera in the context of programme specifically designed for Matera 2019 called GoMatera. These episodes focused on the co-creation aspect of the cultural programme, as well as videos and testimonies promoting the cultural and historical heritage of Matera.

The **impact on tourism** was substantial. 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. The international exposure given to Matera by hosting the ECoC 2019 seems also to have led to a stronger increase of international tourism, while the increase in national tourists between 2012 and 2019 was 72%, foreign tourists increased by 161% over the same period (from about 60,000 to 158,000)

The legacy of Matera 2019 was secured by the allocation of 6 million EUR, including the Melina Mercouri Prize, to ensure that the Foundation could carry on its activities for two years after the ECoC year, finally becoming a **co-creation platform**. However, the planned legacy effects of Matera 2019 were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak and the associated lockdown. As a consequence, the Foundation managed, at the time this report was written, to secure 2.2 million EUR for the legacy and most of the activities planned for 2020 are set to take place in 2021.

Looking forward, citizens participation in Matera 2019 proved to be so strong to lead in December 2019 to the drafting of a **Cultural Manifesto of the citizens' of Matera** stating the clear intent to continue beyond the ECoC year the cultural renovation process started by Matera 2019. Finally, beyond personal and professional growth of various cultural operators, projects implemented through the ECoC programme have their own legacy. The Open Design School remains an active laboratory in the heart of Matera where citizens can co-create project ideas. Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, the **Open Design School** has already hosted several events and workshops in 2020. The digital archive created through the **I-DEA** project is now accessible online² and constitutes an important aspect of the legacy of Matera 2019.

Plovdiv

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 numerous remains from antiquity and more than 200 archaeological sites. Economically, it is among the fastest developing cities in Bulgaria, with traditions in manufacturing, commerce, transport, communications and tourism. The Trakia Economic Zone, which is one of the largest industrial zones in Eastern Europe, is located near Plovdiv, with

² <https://idea.matera-basilicata2019.it/en>

about €2 billion of investments and over 30,000 new jobs created since the zone was established in 1996.

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

Prior to the ECoC, the cultural scene of the city was very vibrant, with notable events including the summer Opera Open festival at the Ancient Theatre, the Night Festival taking place in September in various museums, galleries and night clubs, and One Dance Week, dedicated to contemporary dance. Another recurring event, which attracts many tourists, is the Kapana Fest, taking place in an old neighbourhood, revived as a creative industries district. Other events of the city's cultural calendar were spread among a large variety of museums, galleries, theatres 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.

In December 2012, the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture published a call for applications to launch the competition for the ECoC title between Bulgarian cities. By the deadline in October 2013, eight cities submitted an application: Burgas, Gabrovo, Plovdiv, Ruse, Shumen, Sofia, Varna and Veliko Tarnovo. At the pre-selection meeting in December 2013, four of them were short-listed (Plovdiv, Sofia, Varna and Veliko Tarnovo). One year later, in September 2014, Plovdiv was put forward as the winning city. The Selection Panel was particularly impressed by a number of aspects in the final bid of the city: the coherent and well-designed programme; the partnership plans with other cities in Europe; the bottom-up process of engaging citizens from various backgrounds; and the inclusive approach towards the Roma community in Plovdiv.

A key issue affecting the development phase of the ECoC in Plovdiv was the difficult cooperation with national authorities, which, according to the majority of interviewed stakeholders, were less engaged with the ECoC than expected. The dynamic political context was also challenging, as in 2014 there were snap parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, later 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. This led to a series of delays and a range of re-negotiations in relation to budgets, priorities and infrastructure projects.

The Plovdiv 2019 Foundation had a central role in governance arrangements, as it was specifically set up to develop the city's application and, subsequently, manage the ECoC programme. The Board of Directors had controlling functions, while the day-to-day implementation of the ECoC was led by the Artistic Director and the Executive Director. However, local authorities maintained political oversight of the ECoC, as in 2014 the then mayor of Plovdiv was appointed Chairman of the Board, and in 2019, the newly elected Deputy Mayor took over. Changes in key personnel often generated criticism and were interpreted by some as attempts at politicising the ECoC. A positive aspect was the democratic design of the programme, based almost entirely on open calls for project proposals, which gave the local community an opportunity to curate and deliver cultural content.

The original budget for the ECoC in Plovdiv planned in the bid book was €38.2 million, while in practice, the total budget decreased to €29.4 million. The city faced two major challenges when raising the necessary financial resources. First, there was a significant delay in funding from the national government, which was eventually allocated entirely to infrastructure projects. Secondly, both the contributions from the city and the private sector were lower than expected, and efforts to attract complementary sponsorship proved insufficient. All these factors led to the budget for operating expenditure being cut by more than a half, dropping from €22.3 million, as planned in the bid book, to merely €10 million.

The cultural programme of Plovdiv 2019 was structured around four thematic platforms, which were selected in line with the typical features of the city, its communities, cultural heritage, pace of life, and specific challenges:

- The **Fuse platform** was aimed at the integration of ethnic and minority groups in Plovdiv, as well as bringing together different generations and social groups, in order to overcome exclusion in isolated territories. A special focus was placed on the Roma and Turkish communities, as well as elderly people living in smaller towns and villages around Plovdiv.
- The **Transform platform** was focused on revitalisation of forgotten and abandoned urban spaces and aimed at changing the perceptions of such environments. A special cluster of projects was dedicated to restoring the connection between Plovdiv and the Maritsa River, which runs through the city.
- The **Revive platform** was aimed at preserving cultural heritage in the contemporary context by improving the access to it and stimulating the use of new technology and digital media.
- The **Relax platform** promoted sustainable living, slow life, slow food and de-growth. It was closely connected to the perception of Plovdiv as the city of "Ayliak" (from Turkish), meaning "a carefree state of relaxation and comfort".

Although the actual ECoC followed closely the programme described in the bid book, some of the flagship projects about the Tobacco City, the Adata island and the Kosmos Cinema did not happen as initially foreseen. To a great extent, this was caused by external factors, which were beyond the control of the Foundation. In 2016, the Tobacco City project was undermined by a demolition and a fire, which burned down three of the iconic tobacco warehouses. Although in 2018, the Foundation moved its headquarters to a renovated warehouse, which hosted various cultural events during the title year, the large-scale revitalisation of the district was not possible due to a difficult cooperation between the city administration and private property owners. Similarly, Plovdiv could not invest in a temporary artistic settlement on the Adata island because of legal difficulties related to the private ownership of the land. Instead, an artistic residence programme was implemented there, along with other activities focused on the Maritsa river.

In total, 513 cultural events took place in Plovdiv during the title year, while 54 ECoC related events were held in other cities in Bulgaria and abroad. Compared to previous years, the content of the cultural programme was 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 ECoC in Plovdiv was particularly successful with the content produced in performing and visual arts. Positive impacts were especially visible with regard to the larger, well-established cultural operators such as the State Opera, the Drama Theatre and the State Puppet Theatre in Plovdiv, which all managed to boost their repertoire and delivered high-quality productions. Nevertheless, the ECoC also shed light on a number of emerging young artists and some specialised, niche projects like the Deutsche Telekom's collection of contemporary art.

The European dimension was well embedded in Plovdiv's ECoC, 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. International collaborations included festivals with guest artists, workshops with guest lecturers, artistic residences, as well as joint co-productions. Over 130 partnerships with creative organisations and artists from Europe were established over the ECoC year. Plovdiv stimulated the European dimension through cross-border collaborations on topics of European importance (such as the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the active involvement of the EUNIC members and the EU-Japan Fest Foundation.

One of the positive impacts brought by the ECoC in Plovdiv was increasing the number of cultural consumers, as the share of those who visit cultural events in the city relatively often has increased from 27% in 2017 to 44% in 2019. Attendance levels in the title year were also high, as survey results revealed that 60% of the city residents have attended at least one cultural event in 2019. Overall, 1,528,432 people attended ECoC events in Plovdiv in 2019, out of which 80% were national visitors, 11% were residents of Plovdiv, and about 9% were international visitors. In terms of stimulating access, the ECoC introduced a social dimension to the cultural offer, as events were made accessible for 'new' social groups, which previously were not active participants in the cultural life (including those from Roma communities). About 600 Roma people took part in workshops, educational events and hands-on initiatives, while the audience reached was 2,000 Roma people. Although this could be seen as a modest result, Plovdiv took some initial steps in overcoming prejudice and widening the access to culture for the whole local community.

Plovdiv 2019 achieved strong results in terms of strengthening the capacity of cultural operators to prepare and implement high-quality projects. The FORUM 2019 initiative was key to this (originally CABADEPLO in the bid book) as it stimulated partnership networks and audience development, in order to build capacity of cultural operators. FORUM 2019 started in 2015 and throughout the 5-year period of implementation a total of 60 workshops and training events took place, covering a variety of themes and topics. The Foundation organised a wide range of face-to-face events, including workshops, webinars, Q&A sessions, with team members or guest lecturers who advised cultural players on a range of themes. The EUNIC members also provided significant support to the Foundation in the identification of skill gaps and capacity building needs.

The ECoC helped raise the international profile of Plovdiv by stimulating the tourism sector and attracting significant international media attention. There was a steady increase in the flow of foreign visitors to Plovdiv in the years prior the ECoC and a total of 133,885 international tourists in 2019. In addition, the share of domestic tourists indicating cultural events as the main reason for their visit to Plovdiv increased more

than threefold, from 11% in 2015 to nearly 39% in 2019. This shows that the motivation of visits to the city was very much driven by its cultural offerings linked to its ECoC status. The ECoC also succeeded in creating unprecedented media coverage, with over 800 publications in leading international media and Plovdiv being named one of CNN Travel's best places to visit in 2019.

Positive impacts are also expected with regard to the legacy of the ECoC in Plovdiv, as the Foundation made significant efforts to keep the momentum going after 2019. The entire €1.5 million funding from the Melina Mercouri Prize was reserved for cultural projects in the years following the title. In October 2019, the "Legacy" open call was announced, which was aimed at sustainable development of cultural initiatives and events in the city. Out of the 85 project proposals submitted under the call, 23 were approved for funding by the jury. However, there is a considerable degree of uncertainty surrounding approved projects due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adapt the content, activities and schedules for their implementation.

Overall, the ECoC in Plovdiv was challenging due to the decreased budget, the lack of experience in the city and the whole country to develop and implement such a large-scale cultural project, and the difficult cooperation between local and national authorities. Nevertheless, the action brought various positive impacts related to diversifying the cultural offer of the city, widening the access to culture, strengthening the capacity of cultural operators, and stimulating tourism and economic growth. Similarly, to other ECoC cities, a strategic vision is highly necessary in the long-term management of the culture sector in Plovdiv post-2019, in order to ensure sustainability of the positive changes brought by the initiative.

Conclusions

Relevance: Both the ECoC in Matera and Plovdiv were remained highly relevant to the overall objectives of the Action. At application stage, this was ensured by setting their own objectives in line with the objectives pursued by the initiative, and at implementation stage, the foundations made sure actual programmes followed closely the initial scope aimed at diversifying the cultural offer, embedding the European dimension, strengthening the capacity of cultural operators and increasing the international profile of both cities.

Efficiency: Both Matera and Plovdiv faced difficulties with management arrangements in the preparation period due to a dynamic political context and a strained dialogue with regional (in the case of Matera) and national authorities (in the case of Plovdiv). On the positive side, there was a clear distinction of roles and responsibilities within the teams of both foundations, which ensured a mostly smooth delivery of the ECoC programmes in the title year. Unlike Matera, which managed to raise the initially envisaged financial resources, Plovdiv struggled with a significantly decreased actual budget and operating expenditure cut by more than a half, mainly due to delayed national funding. In addition, both cities experienced difficulties in attracting complementary sponsorship from the private sector, in contrast with expectations set from their bid books.

Effectiveness: The effectiveness of the ECoC can only be determined in the long-run and the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the legacy of both title cities to a level that is still not possible to assess. However, hosting the ECoC 2019 was an unprecedented opportunity

for both title cities, which managed to achieve their short-term objectives successfully. As never before, citizens of both Matera and Plovdiv could access and participate in a wide range of diversified cultural activities. In both cities, the cultural programmes incorporated a strong European dimension, bringing together artists from everywhere in Europe and touching social topics of European resonance as disabilities and accessibility, migration and integration in local communities, inclusion of minorities and people more at risk of social exclusion. The international profile of both cities was also significantly raised 'placing them on the map' and boosting international tourists' presence. Finally, the local cultural sector was also strengthened by the opportunities opened up by the ECoC and by taking part in a multitude of capacity building activities organised by the title cities.

Coherence: The ECoC Action confirms to be coherent and complementary to other EU initiatives, in particular to the Creative Europe Programme. Although preserving its distinctive nature, the action builds on the objectives of the programme, namely international mobility of artists, capacity building of sector organisations and promotion of European cultural diversity as well as of the common features we share as Europeans. The ECoC was also the opportunity to steer the use of other EU financial instruments, as the ERDF whose funds were allocated to projects related to heritage, environment, and cultural equipment.

EU Added value: The experience of the two title cities highlighted how deep the European dimension of the Action influenced the bidding strategy of the cities, the development of the cultural programmes and the implementation of the overall project. In particular, 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.

Recommendations

Recommendations for relevant national institutions:

1. To ensure a smooth preparation and implementation of the ECoC, relevant national authorities could consider actions to facilitate coordination with stakeholders and authorities at local, regional and national levels, especially in countries with less experience in large-scale cultural projects. Possible actions could include joint planning sessions for infrastructure projects, monthly progress meetings, discussions about challenges encountered and possible solutions, etc. This is especially relevant for those ECoCs with a larger public sector contribution to the budget, where stronger collaboration between local and national institutions is necessary.
2. Relevant national authorities could consider facilitating opportunities for current or potential applicant cities to exchange experience in mobilising financial resources and attracting private sponsorship for their ECoC. This has been an issue for both 2019 cities. Possible actions could take the form of dedicated

sessions focused on private sector involvement and cultural sponsorship, which is still not a widespread practice in all EU Member States.

Recommendations for the EU institutions:

3. The Commission could consider inviting the title cities to collaborate in the development of a common international communication campaign between the two title cities. This could ensure a more efficient and effective use of available resources and a stronger impact on the European dimension of the Action.
4. The Commission could consider placing stronger emphasis on the sustainability aspect of the action and, in particular, on the capacity building of cultural operators in this respect. The ability of cultural operators to find financing opportunities beyond the ECoC year is fundamental to ensure that the progress made are not dispersed once the action is finished.
5. In order to ensure comparability of results between title cities and over time, the Commission could consider establishing a clear and harmonised set of minimum Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that the title cities will be responsible to monitor and report on. It would be recommended to limit the number of KPIs to be collected for each specific objective and to select local level KPIs that reflect the themes and implementation methods of the ECoC, so to avoid unnecessary administrative burden on the title cities.



Publications Office
of the European Union