

European Capitals of Culture

In search of the perfect cultural event

SUMMARY

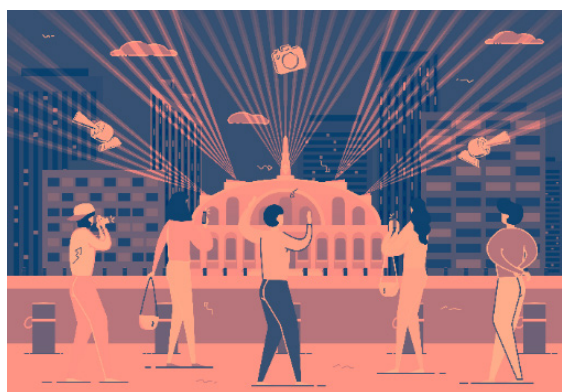
Between 1985 and 2019, 60 cities have held the title of European Capital of Culture – most recently Matera in Italy and Plovdiv in Bulgaria in 2019. Initiated in 1983, by Greece's then Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, the concept took shape two years later as an inter-governmental initiative under the name of the 'European City of Culture'. The success of the event was such that in 1999, the Council of the EU transformed it into a Community action, and created a more transparent rotational system for the designation of the titleholder.

The selection procedure – last modified in 2014 – places particular focus on the monitoring of proposals, the enhanced European dimension of projects, improved competition between candidate cities, and the redefinition of the selection panel role.

As more and more cities enter the European Capitals of Culture race, substantial sums of money are being spent, including on the bidding process. While in the early years of the programme (1985-1994) the average operating budget was around €25 million per city, this amount has more than doubled to reach some €60 million per city for the period 2007-2017.

With rising budgets, there is also increased scrutiny of cities, national governments and the EU, as to the wider benefits in terms of the cultural development, social cohesion and city image that most bids promise. This, in turn, has led to more frequent and sophisticated monitoring and evaluation of the whole process, both by the European Commission and by the host cities themselves.

The symbolic celebration of European cultural identities is however closely tied to the economic success of the operation. According to experts, over time a number of conflicts and tensions have become apparent due to the multiple and sometimes contradictory objectives of the event, e.g. economic and cultural, to name just two. Additional criticism includes failure to enable local ownership, difficulty in overcoming social divides and exhaustion of local resources. Notwithstanding that, ex-post evaluations of the event show that in general it boosts economic growth and tourism, helps build a sense of community and contributes to urban regeneration.



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Background

In 1985, the European Union (EU) launched the European Capitals of Culture initiative, with Athens in Greece chosen as the first titleholder. Since then, 59 other cities have been awarded the title, most recently Matera in Italy and Plovdiv in Bulgaria in 2019.

The event has been widely recognised as Europe's most ambitious, cultural, collaborative programme in both scope and scale and the [third most important mega-event](#) hosted in Europe, apart from the Olympics and the World and European football championships.

[Practitioners](#) claim that it is 'the longest running and firmly institutionalised explicit form of cultural policy in the EU'. Over the three past decades, the European Capitals of Culture event has increasingly come to be viewed by host cities as a tool to regenerate and reposition themselves in both economic and cultural terms.

The [initiative](#) was originally designed to 'highlight the cultural wealth and diversity of the cities of Europe whilst emphasising their shared cultural heritage and the vitality of the arts'. At present, being a European Capital of Culture is seen to offer invaluable marketing opportunities for the winning city and its image. Importantly, [authors](#) argue that the event has become an attractive 'soft power' resource for the European Union.

The success of the concept has been such that it has inspired other regions in the world. Ten years after its introduction in the European Union, the Arab group in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) initiated a similar event for [Arab capitals](#). The [American Capital of Culture](#) initiative began in 1997.

A European Youth Capital title is awarded since 2009 (see box) and a number of national 'Capital of Culture' events have also been initiated in [Italy](#), [Lithuania](#), and the [United Kingdom](#).

European Youth Capital

The [European Youth Capital](#) is a title awarded annually, since 2009, by the [European Youth Forum](#), the largest representative body of youth organisations in Europe.

The initiative is designed to empower young people, boost youth participation at local level and strengthen European identity. Cultural events and educational programmes held in the title-holding cities are just some of the vectors which help raise awareness about the EU – its values, its achievements and the benefits it brings to (young) European citizens in regions and cities.

[Novi Sad](#), the second largest city in Serbia, has been awarded the title in 2019, and is also scheduled to become a European Capital of Culture in 2021.

European Capital of Culture initiative: A victim of its success

The growing popularity of the European Capital of Culture brand can be measured by the skyrocketing number of applications. While in the early days of the programme a single city – usually the capital – was appointed by the national government, the opening up of the title to competitive bidding in the late 1990s unleashed an unprecedented number of applications.

The pinnacle was reached in 2000, when nine cities coveting the title for the millennium were awarded the brand. The idea was to celebrate the new millennium from various locations, and equally to take advantage of the symbolic importance of the year to intensify the promotion of the European vision.

In order to meet the increasing demand from cities and cope with the enlargement of the EU from 15 to 27 countries, a rotation system among EU countries was introduced in 2004, with two capitals per year. However, the number of cities competing to represent their country also continued to grow, with 16 applicants for the 2016 title in Spain, and 15 Italian cities vying to host the event in 2019

Source: [Evaluating the European Capital of Culture that Never Was: the case of Brabantstad 2018](#), G. Richards, 2013.

Becoming a European Capital of Culture

Origins

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

The idea of the European Capitals of Culture was put forward in 1983, by Greece's then Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, and it was launched as an intergovernmental initiative two years later under the name '[European City of Culture](#)'. Mercouri's idea was to step up interaction among Europeans and to enrich the cultural content of the European project, which, until then was mainly based on economic premises.

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

European Capitals of Culture initiative: Evolution and development

Mirroring the introduction of key EU decisions and conceptual milestones, the initiative builds around three key stages:

- Stage 1 (1985-1996): During this period, the programme was run as an intergovernmental event without the involvement of external experts or any formal assessments. In the absence of a legislative framework, host cities were designated by national governments and had less than two years to develop their cultural offer and gather the funding. The first stage comprised 12 cities, representing each of the EU member countries at the time. Notwithstanding, some of them – such as Glasgow 1990, Antwerp 1993 and Copenhagen 1996 – stood out for their capacity to innovate and take the programme forward.
- Stage 2 (1997-2004) saw the introduction of selection criteria – including cultural cooperation across European borders – and bidding procedures. This, in turn, led to the development of culture-specific programming and a substantial raising of ambition. This new cycle involved 19 cities in 14 countries and secured greater EU involvement with the embedding of the initiative under the umbrella of the main EU culture programme, first Kaleidoscope and then Culture 2000. Dedicated EU funding for the initiative also grew over this period.
- Stage 3 (2005-2019), the most extensive to date, comprised 29 cities from 29 countries (including Norway and Turkey). In 2006, the first legislative framework was set up and the programme became a Community action, involving the inclusion of formal European dimension criteria, and clearer selection panel guidelines. A [2014](#) decision modifying the rules contributed to refining the selection criteria and strengthening the monitoring and evaluation processes.

Source: [European Capitals of Culture: Success strategies and long-term effects](#), Policy Department Structural and Cohesion Policies, European Parliament, 2013.

Selection criteria and bidding

The selection procedure – last modified in [2014](#) – integrated recommendations from stakeholders relating in particular to monitoring proposals in order to enhance their European dimension, improving competition between candidate cities, and redefining the role of the selection panel. The initiative is now open to cities in candidate countries or potential candidates for EU membership and EFTA/EEA countries every third year as of 2021. The [chronological order](#) of countries hosting the title until 2033 (see Figure 1) is set by the European Parliament and Council.

Six years before the title-year, the selected host countries publish a call for applications, usually through their Ministry for Culture. Cities interested in participating in the competition must submit a proposal to be examined by a panel composed of ten independent experts. The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission select three experts each from a pool of potential European experts. The Committee of the Regions selects one expert. The bids are assessed against multiple criteria subdivided into six categories: 'contribution to the long-term strategy', 'European dimension', 'cultural and artistic content', 'capacity to deliver', 'outreach' and 'management'.

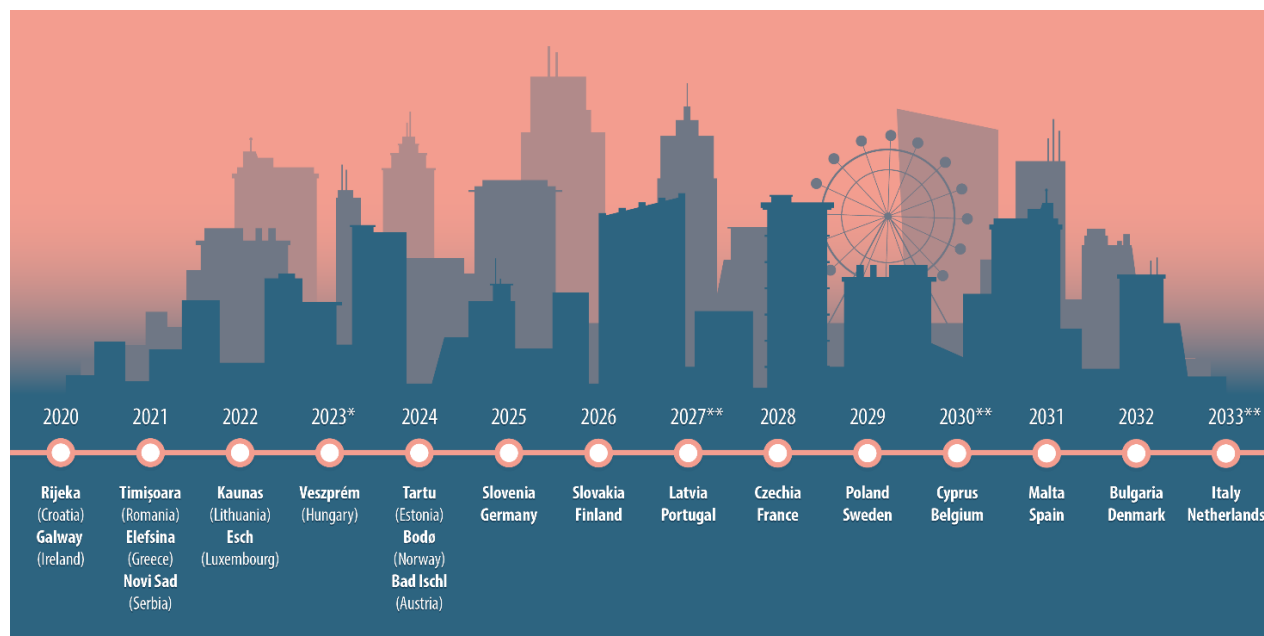
Candidates are notably expected to integrate a true European dimension, reinforce cooperation among EU countries with the support of the public and highlight the role of the city in the formation and development of culture in Europe. Successful candidates must also devise a programme with a lasting impact that contributes to the long-term cultural, economic and social development of the city concerned.

Small is beautiful

Experts point out that jury members tend to favour smaller cities against bigger ones, thus confirming that a city is chosen not for what it is, but rather for its future contribution to the common cultural heritage. For instance, the Hungarian capital Budapest lost out to Pécs (2010), in the same way the Slovakian capital Bratislava lost out to Košice (2013).

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

Figure 1 – Future Capitals of Culture, 2020-2033



Note: * The United Kingdom was initially scheduled to host the event in 2023, but its [participation](#) was discontinued following to the Brexit vote.

** Participation open to a city from a candidate country or potential candidate.

Source: [European Commission](#), 2019; [decision](#) of the European Parliament and Council, 2014.

The panel of experts agrees on a short-list of cities, which are then asked to submit more detailed applications. The panel then reconvenes to assess the final applications and recommends one city per host country for the title.

European Capitals of Culture are formally designated four years before the actual year. This long interval is necessary for the planning and preparation of such a complex event. The panel of experts, assisted by the European Commission, has a continuing role during these four years, in supporting host cities with advice and guidance and taking stock of their preparations. To that end, the Commission is tasked with organising three monitoring meetings attended by the panel and the designated cities – respectively 3 years, 18 months and 2 months before the year of the title – issuing monitoring reports on the state of preparations and any steps to be taken by the host city.

Funding

As more and more cities enter the European Capitals of Culture race, substantial sums of money are being spent, including on the bidding process. [Experts](#) argue that the strong competition surrounding the event generates substantial inflation in budget spending. While in the early years of the programme (1985-1994), the average operating budget was around €25 million per city, this amount has more than doubled to reach €60 million per city for 2007-2017.

As shown in Figure 2, the total operational expenditure (excluding infrastructure) of title-holding cities over the above-mentioned period ranges from €9 million (Pafos, Cyprus, 2017) to €289 million (Istanbul, Turkey, 2010). The case of Istanbul should however be treated with caution, since it ran a surplus of some €100 million.¹ Liverpool's [budget](#) – €166 million – (United Kingdom, 2008) appears particularly high. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Liverpool structured its cultural activities over multiple years and directed funding to cultural organisations from the core local authority for a period of time leading up to and including 2008. Budgets employed by four other cities – Mons (Belgium, 2015), Essen (Germany, 2010), Wrocław (Poland, 2016) and Marseille (France, 2013) – were in the range €70-€100 million.

Even though average budgets have risen over time, there is a sizeable difference between countries that joined the EU before 2004 and those that joined the EU later. This last feature also coincides with a clearly perceivable geographical divide. With the notable exception of Pafos² (Cyprus, 2017) and Wrocław (Poland, 2016), host cities from post-2004 Member States employ the smallest budgets. In general, size also seems to matter, with 'bigger' cities using larger budgets. However, this size is fairly relative – and ultimately rather dependant on the geographical divide, as witnessed by a comparison made between two 'small' cities, such as Tallinn (Estonia, 2011) with a budget of €14 million, and Linz (Austria, 2009) with a budget of €69 million.

In comparison, the European Union's financial contribution to the event is quite modest – €1.5 million per titleholder – as it is expected that it will be augmented by local public and private investment. Notwithstanding this, the Capitals of Culture are endowed with the largest budget for a single European cultural event, in the form of the [Melina Mercouri Prize](#). The decision for its award is based on the positive recommendation of the panel of independent experts.

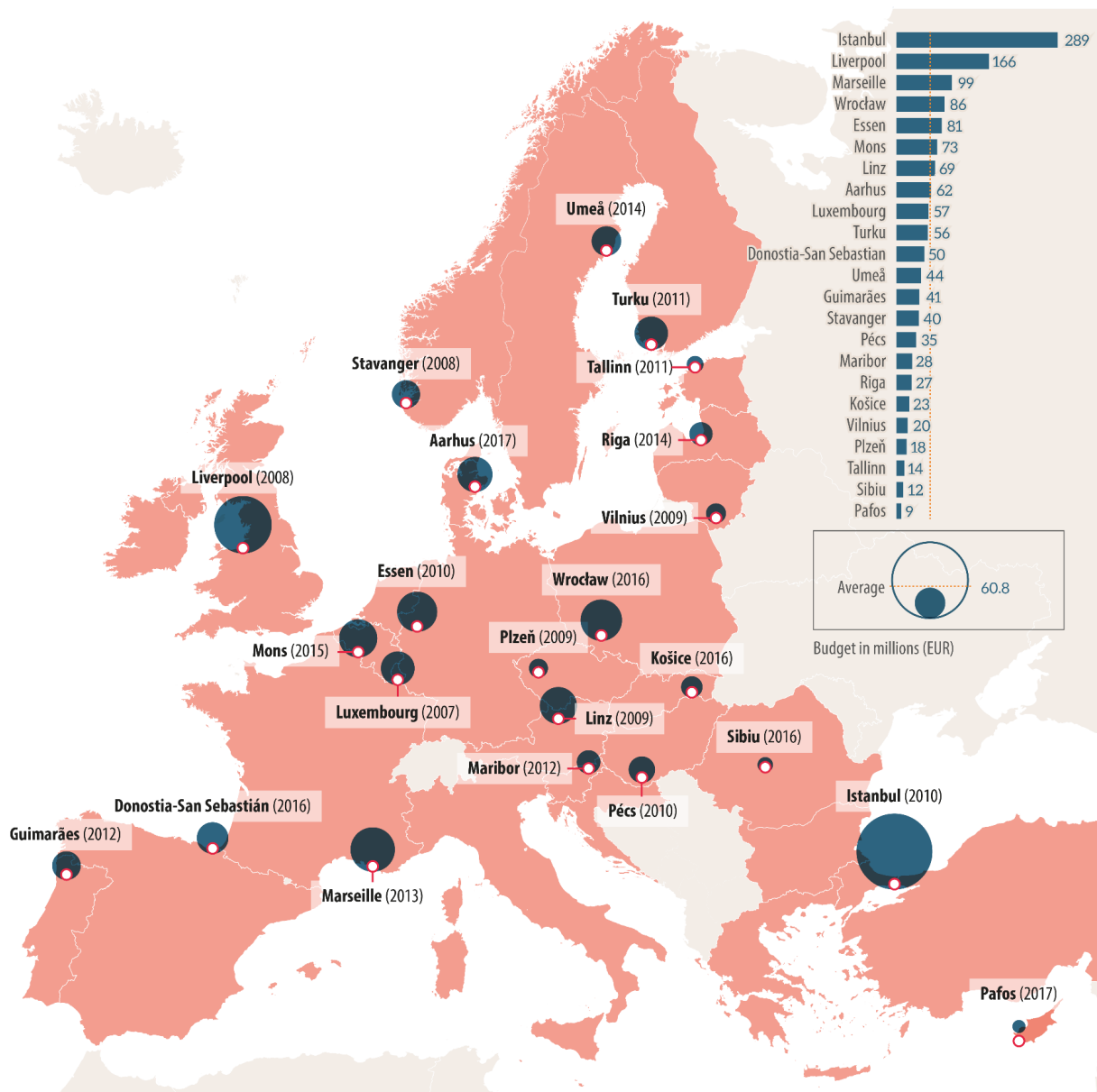
According to the EU [guidelines](#), the EU allocation must not exceed 60 % of the total budget of the project submitted. However, as seen, host cities have been spending sums massively exceeding that requirement.

Importantly, [experts](#) argue that whilst the EU funding is a very small proportion of the total expenditure and that it is not a driver in cities' decisions to bid for the title, the designation itself 'has a very effective leverage effect'. Centrally, this seems to suggest that there is an effective relationship between the title itself and other income streams, rather than between EU funding and other income streams.

Similarly, [practitioners](#) highlight that the relatively modest proportion of EU funding makes 'the action as a whole... very cost-effective when compared to other EU policy instruments or mechanisms'.

Apart from the Melina Mercouri prize, host cities are also eligible for urban development funding under the European Union's [Structural Funds](#). Cultural bodies participating in the event may also obtain funding under the [culture strand](#) of the [Creative Europe programme](#).

Figure 2 – Operational budgets European Capitals of Culture, 2007-2017, € million



Source: European Commission, [Evaluation reports](#), 2007-2017.

Note: Figures have been rounded.

Challenges

In over 30 years of existence, the European Capitals of Culture have come to be viewed as a multidimensional initiative incorporating both economic and cultural premises, representing local cultural heritage and European identities, hosting international arts events while promoting the local cultural sector and committing to social inclusion. Similarly, the event organisers have had to contend with a number of conflicting pressures, such as creating a balance between 'high' and 'low' art, traditional and contemporary expressions, big international names and local talent ... This short chapter is an attempt to present the main challenges faced by the event since its inception.

Creating durable cultural elites: in search of a good balance

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

A 'bourgeois playground'?

[Experts](#) question whether the European Capitals of Culture favour only conventional cultural events related to well-established cultural institutions and reflecting the cultural taste of the bourgeoisie in a process of 'cultural gentrification', while forcing out more alternative and innovative art. According to them, this was the case in Stavanger (Norway, 2008) where the conventional cultural events were predominant.

Inclusion of local population: 'Can do better'

Local participation and community engagement are bidding criteria and are seen to be essential for the success of the event. In many cases, the local population remains concerned that the focus of the event is usually on enhancing the touristic image of the city abroad, rather than on the local community. On a few occasions, the European Capitals of Culture events have prompted counter-movements within the localities (as in [Weimar](#), Germany, 1999).

Official brand image v local identity

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

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

Social inclusion: Empty rhetoric?

[Experts](#) claim that candidate cities are prone to rhetoric demonstrating their desire to be perceived as 'inclusive' when presenting their applications. This phenomenon has brought about a noticeable inflation of language over the years without many tangible results. In addition, practitioners maintain that the appropriateness of a social perspective in a cultural event remains controversial. Some cities – for example Lille (France, 2004) – have taken the view that social objectives should be mainstreamed within the programme, rather than treated as a separate issue. However, experts doubt that this could be achieved in practice, since marginalised people do not have the necessary leverage, whether financial or political, to pursue their objectives.

Exhaustion of local resources for culture

The European Capitals of Culture event is sometimes perceived as a threat, since it may entail the exhaustion of local funds dedicated to culture, especially when they are scarce. For instance, in Turku (Finland, 2011), involving the main municipal library in the flagship project, removed funding from local libraries, and the library network has been reduced. In the [citizens' forum](#) for Turku as Cultural Capital, 'Hallo, does Turku hear us', questions were raised about the opening hours of district libraries. Similarly, forums discussed the removal of artists' studios and workspaces from municipal properties in the centre of Turku.

He who pays the piper calls the tune ...

Striking the right balance between political support and artistic freedom is one of the main challenges most Capitals face. On the one hand, political commitment is fundamental, as most of the funds for the event are public. However, this gives rise to political capital being made out of the event, often to the irritation of culture and arts professionals. [Experts](#) argue that the low level of direct EU funding for the event makes it highly dependent on political will. Changes in political power between selection as the title-holder and implementation of the event can put the necessary commitment and resources in doubt, and result in conflict over funding, flagship projects, or indeed the entire programme.

Loss of cultural distinction

Since 2007, various central and eastern European cities have aimed to instil a breath of fresh air into their economies through large construction projects, developing and regenerating public spaces, investing in creative industries, and transforming the image of cities, with the help of the European Capital of Culture brand. While the investments are praised for having recreated urban spaces with a contemporary look and stylish atmosphere, [practitioners](#) criticise the blending in of urban spaces as a result of abiding common criteria and conforming to certain cultural values and trends in the urban development.

Managing post-event decline

Post-event decline is a feature experienced by many host cities as event-related euphoria dissipates and tourism growth slows. [Researchers](#) highlight that the 'boosterism' surrounding the Sibiu event (Romania, 2007) failed to bring about any perceivable structural change to persistent infrastructure problems. Adding to that was the sharp contrast between the carefully curated image of the medieval city and the evident reality of post-socialist degradation.

Evaluating impacts

With rising budgets, there is also more pressure on cities, national governments and the EU to show that the amounts invested in the event have produced the wider benefits in terms of cultural development, social cohesion and city image that most bids promise. This in turn has led to more frequent and sophisticated monitoring and evaluation of the whole process, both by the European Commission and by the host cities themselves. These evaluations, however, were mainly based on quantitative indicators, targeting economic impacts, prompting fears among [practitioners](#) of 'turning the European Capitals of Culture into rather similar celebrations of European added value'.

The legal basis adopted in [2006](#) obliged the European Commission to ensure the external independent evaluation of the results of the events in accordance with the objectives and criteria laid down in the decision, i.e. the European and social dimensions of the events, the efficiency of the actions and the sustainability of the projects. The evaluation process has also expanded to cover not just the ex-post impacts, but also to monitoring the process of bidding as well as developing the programme.

The trend towards more holistic evaluation studies reached a watershed with Liverpool (United Kingdom, 2008), which created a specialised research unit to that end. The ['Impacts08'](#) programme generated a whole raft of studies on different aspects of the European Capitals of Culture. This also led to the development of a European research framework by the [ECOC Policy Group](#) (2010) and to the creation of the [Institute of Cultural Capital](#), which conducts interdisciplinary research critically examining the role and value of cultural interventions in urban environments.

However, [experts](#) argue that recent studies still avoid key issues, focusing on the different types of impacts – most notably economic impacts – rather than longer term effects, thereby providing a limited and potentially warped view of the effects of the event. Another common problem seems to be that evaluations usually start just before the event year itself, and end almost immediately afterwards, since the organisation hosting the event tends to be disbanded a few months after the end of the event.

Examples of positive impacts on hosting cities

Boosting economic growth and tourism

Results from a 2016 [study](#) support claims that hosting a Capital of Culture event serves as catalyst for urban regeneration and development. Experts argue that winning cities enjoy a rise of 4.5 % of GDP per capita compared to runners up.³ The effect starts two years before the launch of the event and spreads over five years after it ends.

Similarly, estimates show that each euro (coming from public sources) invested in Mons (Belgium, 2015) generated between €5.5 and €6 for the local economy. Marseille (France, 2013) attracted a record number of 11 million visits. Over 40 % of Wrocław's cultural and creative industries saw an increase in turnover during the celebrations (Poland, 2016). Some 30 % of the 5.2 million visitors came from abroad, marking a substantial increase in international tourist stays during the year.⁴

Building a sense of community

'[Fuse](#)' – one of the programme platforms of Plovdiv (Bulgaria, 2019) focused on the integration of ethnic and minority groups from different generations, shining a light on the largest Roma community in the Balkans. Through the '[Foster the City](#)' programme, residents of Plzeň (Czechia, 2015) identified public spaces in need of improvement and helped implement the projects including the renovation of the Forgotten Garden, the construction and installation of deckchairs and a dance floor in the park ring and the renovation of the former Municipal River Baths. In Donostia-San Sebastián (Spain, 2016) about 60 % of the projects involved local people, which helped instil a sense of belonging and mutual understanding.

Sustaining urban regeneration

In the run-up to the event, Marseille (France, 2013) underwent a substantial physical transformation. The European Capital of Culture celebration was part of a €600 million investment project in cultural infrastructure which was in turn integrated into a multi-billion euro effort to revitalise the city. Marseille is now home to the [Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations](#), which attracted over 1.3 million visitors in 2018.

In Košice (Slovakia, 2013), the private sector and local universities teamed up to transform an industrial city by highlighting its creative potential. The new cultural infrastructure also helped establish Košice as a tourist hub for the Carpathian Region.

Source: Unless otherwise indicated European Commission, [European Capitals of Culture factsheet](#), 2019.

MAIN REFERENCES

European Commission, [European Capitals of Culture factsheet](#), 2019.

European Commission, [Compendium of recommendations from ex-post evaluations of European Capitals of Culture 2007-2016](#), 2018.

European Commission, [European Capitals of Culture: The road to success from 1985 to 2010](#), 2009.

[European Capitals of Culture: Success Strategies and Long-Term Effects](#), Policy Department Structural and Cohesion Policies, Directorate General for Internal Policies, European Parliament, 2013.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Initially, a substantial part of Istanbul's [budget](#) for the event (€100 million) was to be provided through a special levy on each litre of gas or oil sold in Istanbul from the date of designation. However, the government ultimately chose not to implement the fuel levy, fearing that its use in Istanbul alone – rather than in the entire country – could be considered unconstitutional. Instead, 95 % of Istanbul 2010 final funding (€289 million) was provided by the Turkish Ministry of Finance and exceeded by far the sum of the fuel levy. As a result, Istanbul enjoyed the largest budget of any European Capital of Culture to date.
- ² The initial bid [budget](#) was €23 million. However, the 2013 financial crisis made the task of securing funding from public/private institutions a lot more challenging, resulting in a substantial budgetary cut.
- ³ It should be noted that various other studies on the economic impact of mega-events – such as the [Olympic Games](#) – typically find few or negative effects, including a 2014 [research article](#) measuring the impact of hosting the European Capital of Culture on life satisfaction and GDP. However, the authors ascertain that the variation in the results is most likely due to the fact that the European Capital of Culture is very different, insofar as it generally involves lower costs than mega-events and is usually centred on the existent cultural heritage of a city. Also, mega-events happen over a period of less than a month, while the Capital of Culture celebrations last for a year and thus continue attracting visitors and bringing economic effects over a longer period of time.
- ⁴ However, experts argue that the European Capital of Culture event does not necessarily lead to a long-term increase in visitors. Based on [analysis](#) of host cities up to 2011, it would appear to be exceptional for title-holders to experience growth in arrivals both during the title year and the year immediately afterward. Out of all the cities for which data is available, only four achieved this: Lisbon (Portugal, 1994), Bologna (Italy, 2000), Reykjavík (Iceland, 2000) and Tallinn (Estonia, 2011).

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eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

