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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE  
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE  
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the first interim evaluation of the European Capitals of Culture Action 2020-2033**

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## 1. Introduction

Born in 1985 upon an idea of former Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri, **the European Capital of Culture** (hereafter ECoC) is a flagship action of the European Union. The aim of the initiative is to promote and celebrate Europe's rich cultural diversity and shared heritage, thereby increasing citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area, and to strengthen the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities. Initially, cities were designated as 'European Cities of Culture' by Member States acting on the basis of a Resolution of the Ministers Responsible for Cultural Affairs, which recognised the essential role cities play in the formation and spread of culture in Europe. Following the adoption of Decision 1419/1999/EC (amended by Decision No 649/2005/EC in 2005), the 'European Cities of Culture' became 'European Capitals of Culture' and the initiative was established as a Community action. A further decision was adopted in 2006 (1622/2006/EC), completing the rules for the selection and monitoring of the different European Capitals of Culture. The current legal basis, Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, was adopted in 2014 to cover the years 2020-2033.

This is the first interim evaluation of the ECoC action for the period 2020-2033, as required by Article 16(2) of the Decision. It assesses the performance of the action against the five evaluation criteria established in the Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox: Effectiveness, Efficiency, Relevance, Coherence and EU Added value as well as the longer-term impact of the intervention to better understand the potential legacy linked to hosting a European Capital of Culture. It also aims at identifying good practices and lessons for future ECoCs and European cities interested in further developing their cultural strategies and cultural offer. Finally, the evaluation identifies potential improvements to the action to be considered for the successor initiative post-2033.

Due to the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of the action at the beginning of the 2020-2033 period, the choice was made to include a broader scope of different ECoCs and titleholding cities selected and monitored under the provisions of the previous legal instrument. This was deemed necessary to get a better perspective on the longer-term impact of the action.

### **Design of the action**

Under the current legal basis covering 2020 to 2033, two Member States are entitled to host the ECoC action each year, according to a chronological order set in the Decision. Furthermore, in 2022, 2024, 2028, 2030 and 2033, a city in an EFTA/EEA country, candidate country or potential candidate (non-EU countries) may also hold the title. Member States manage their selection procedure at national level, under the responsibility of their relevant authority and with the assistance of the European Commission. The Commission is directly responsible for the organisation of the open competitions between cities in non-EU countries.

Competitions start no later than six years before the title year, when the Member State concerned (the Commission for the competition between cities in non-EU Member States) publishes a call for submission of applications. The call includes the six criteria as specified in the legal basis: 'contribution to the long-term strategy', 'European dimension', 'cultural and artistic content', 'capacity to deliver', 'outreach' and 'management'.

The selection is then organised in two phases: pre-selection no later than five years ahead of the title year (candidate cities are reduced to a short-list) followed by selection nine months later (one city is recommended for the title). A panel of experts examine the bids against the

objectives and criteria of the action. Based on the panel's recommendation, the Member State concerned (the Commission for non-EU countries) formally designates the winning city.

Once designated, the city is submitted to a monitoring process until the title year. As part of this process, the Commission convenes three meetings between the city and the panel to review progress and give guidance. Based on a recommendation by the panel at the end of the monitoring process, the Commission decides whether to pay or not the Melina Mercouri Prize to the city at the start of the title year. The Prize is funded by the Creative Europe programme.

The Expert panel in charge of the selection and monitoring procedures consists of up to 12 members: ten are nominated on a rolling basis by the EU institutions and bodies for mandates of three years (three by the European Parliament, three by the Council of the EU, three by the Commission and one by the European Committee of the Regions) and up to two members are nominated by the Member State concerned.

The pre-selection of the European experts is made by the Commission through an open call for expression of interest. The criteria to select the experts are listed in Article 6 of the legal basis.

The action is managed in the Commission through the Creative Europe unit of the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC).

Compared to its predecessor, the ECoC action governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU brought the following changes:

- Removal of the need for confirmation of selected cities at EU level, with ECoC titleholders designated directly by the Member State concerned;
- Opening to candidate countries, potential candidates and EFTA/EEA countries;
- More specific and robust selection criteria, with a stronger emphasis on the long-term impact of the action and the European dimension;
- Inclusion of considerations regarding the panel members' profiles in the legal basis;
- Organisation of three monitoring meetings instead of two, with a first one three years ahead of the title year and the last one a couple of months before the title year;
- Change of the responsibility for ex post evaluation from the European Commission to the designated city;
- Postponement of the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize from two months before the start of the title year to the beginning of the year.

## **2. State of Development of the Action**

Since 1985, the title has been awarded to 82 different cities in all EU Member States (including the UK until the entry into force of the Withdrawal Agreement in 2020) and was granted to cities in 5 non-EU countries: Iceland (2000), Türkiye (2010), Norway (2000, 2008, 2024), Serbia (2022) and North Macedonia (2028). 22 cities have been selected under the current legal basis, 13 of them hosted/are hosting the action at the time of the drafting of this Communication, while 9 have been selected and are preparing their title year.

Decision No 445/2014/EU was amended in 2017 to integrate European Free Trade Association countries that are parties to the Agreement on the European Economic Area. It was amended again in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It offered both 2020 ECoCs (Rijeka and Galway) the possibility to extend their ECoC year until 30 April 2021. Furthermore, the ECoC year in Timișoara and Elefsina was postponed from 2021 to 2023 while the title year in Novi Sad was postponed from 2021 to 2022.

The granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine and Georgia in 2022 and 2023 made both countries eligible for the competition open to cities in non-EU countries as both countries also participate in the Creative Europe Programme.

### 3. Evaluation Findings: Successes and Challenges

#### *Effectiveness*

The ECoC action was found to have stimulated an increased number of cultural activities and a widened cultural offer in host cities, both in terms of genre and location. Looking at the local evaluations by the ECoC between 2013 and 2022, **a typical ECoC year consists of around 1,000 to 1,200 separate cultural activities**. It also had a considerable effect on investments in cultural activities and infrastructure across host cities, with cultural budgets of host city administrations often around 5 times larger as a consequence of hosting their ECoC. **Official attendance figures of the 2013-2022 ECoC show that around 38.5 million people participated in ECoC-supported cultural activity** over this period as an audience member, a curator or a project beneficiary. This dynamism, alongside with the possibility for the public to attend many events for free, helped in widening the type of beneficiaries who consumed culture and encouraged people who were not active on the cultural front to attend cultural activities. For example, several ECoC have included school pupils, people from disadvantaged backgrounds (such as migrants and the unemployed) as well as people living in the peripheral neighbourhoods of a city.

The ECoC also contributed to strengthening the cultural and creative sectors in host cities. While part of this impact came from dedicated capacity-building projects, it was largely driven by the creation of formal and informal cultural ecosystems. The ECoC encouraged local stakeholders to collaborate in designing and delivering cultural programmes. This collaboration, along with the experience of managing large numbers of cultural projects, helped develop local talent and build long-term sector capacity.

The evaluation underlines how the ECoC successfully tackles its strategic objective to raise the international profile of the host cities through the delivery of a strong cultural programme. This is especially illustrated by an increased number of foreign visitors in host cities, by extended international media coverage before and during the year and enhanced international collaboration. Overall, analysis from those ECoCs which collected relevant data shows that **an ECoC year can increase visitors numbers in a host city by around 30-40%** (25-35% of which come from abroad).

#### *Efficiency*

The evaluation found that, by design, **ECoC is a cost-effective action able to leverage public and private funding at relatively low cost for the Union (around EUR 3-5 million per year)**. Analysis of the ECoCs budgets between 2013 and 2022 shows that **the action has collectively stimulated around EUR 900 million in funding towards the cultural agenda across the EU**, taking into consideration all the funding spent from EU, national, regional, local and private sources.

The Melina Mercouri prize (EUR 1.5 M) represents only a fraction of the entire ECoC budget of title cities, ranging between 2% and 7% of the overall ECoC budget. A significant portion comes from public sources, with national, local, and regional funding collectively providing 71% of the budget. However, it should be noted that there is often a discrepancy between

planned and actual budgets, with most cities facing shortfalls due to various factors, such as reduced financial commitments from national governments and unforeseen circumstances. Only a few cities delivered their programmes with their original budget projections.

The evaluation also outlined challenges affecting the efficiency of the action and the lessons candidate or title-holding cities could learn from their ECoC experience. For instance, time constraints between the pre-selection and final selection stages represent an issue for candidate cities, which sometimes cannot fully improve their application between the two rounds of selection. At a later stage, they can encounter difficulties to capitalise on the work done and competencies acquired during the bidding process. Moreover, they can have difficulties relying on sufficient learning and communication between past, current and future ECoC cities.

#### *Efficiency of the selection and monitoring procedures*

Under the current legal basis, the selection process encompasses the following steps:

- Call for submission of applications: at least 6 years before the title year.
- Application submission deadline: minimum 10 months after the publication of the call for submission of applications.
- Pre-selection meeting and report: 5 years before the title year.
- Revised application submission deadline and selection meeting and report: about 9 months after the pre-selection meeting.
- City designation: 4 years before the title year.

Following the selection, three monitoring meetings take place, three years, 18 months and two months before the year of the title. While stakeholders consulted consider the current selection and monitoring processes overall as working well, they also identified areas for improvement:

- **Application timeline:** While at the governmental level the timeline for the selection process is considered overall sufficient, cities find meeting the current deadlines challenging. In particular, the nine-month period between pre-selection and final selection. This short timeframe adds pressure on cities, particularly smaller or less-experienced ones, in terms of building international relations and securing commitments from local stakeholders.
- **Monitoring meetings:** Some stakeholders advocated for a shift from a monitoring process toward a more advisory role, with panel experts working closely with cities, offering real-time solutions and mentorship. This would be in line with the challenges in relation to the lack of the required skills and capacity-building in ECoCs.

Overall, while four years after selection could be enough for cities to implement the event, this timeframe might be challenging if a city has not already reached a certain level of cultural maturity. While this does not necessarily imply that less prepared cities should not be considered for the title, their bid book should be realistically examined and judged in light of the city's actual cultural capacity, and if selected, sufficient guidance, monitoring and capacity-building opportunities should be provided.

Stakeholders also noted that time can be wasted due to misunderstandings around two key ECoC dimensions: the European dimension and legacy. While participants in the evaluation said they eventually understood both terms, some felt that clearer guidance on what the European dimension looks like in practice would save time during the bid or planning stages.

The onboarding and handover of panel experts present another area of improvement, with new members often lacking the appropriate tools for a seamless transition, leading to knowledge

loss and uneven involvement. The ECoC action could benefit from developing structured onboarding processes and emphasising an advisory role for panel experts to overcome these challenges. On a more general note, it was perceived that a more centralised communication strategy at the EU level would increase the visibility of the initiative as a whole but also of titleholding cities, giving them precious support.

### *Coherence*

The ECoC action showcases strong internal and external coherence. The processes for host-city selection and management align well with ECoC objectives and the bidding process mandates that cities embed their ECoC project into a broader cultural strategy, while involving various stakeholders and different governance levels. National stakeholders are especially vital, often viewing ECoC as a matter of national importance. However, challenges may arise in balancing local priorities with European objectives, particularly regarding the European dimension.

The ECoC aligns with other EU programmes, especially with the EU flagship programme for the cultural and creative Sectors (CCS), Creative Europe. Both share core objectives like enhancing cultural diversity and fostering cross-border collaborations. Similarly, both support EU CCS' competitiveness, enhance cultural participation, and promote European identity. The ECoC action shares features with EU priorities in the fields of greening and social inclusion. There is room for improvement in aligning with environmental priorities and EU external policies. While title-holding cities or their region or Member State may benefit from EU funding, including cohesion policy funding in the field of culture, proactive coordination between ECoC actions and other sources of EU funding remains limited. Regarding the relationship with national initiatives, the evaluation noted synergies, as well as some limited overlaps.

### *EU Added Value*

The ECoC action demonstrates **a clear and significant EU added value by fostering international collaboration among cultural players in hosting cities and their peers in other countries, by enhancing the visibility of European cities, and by promoting a shared European cultural identity.** Through the support of the ECoC, cities—particularly smaller and less internationally recognised ones—have successfully accessed global cultural networks, hosted ambitious and diverse cultural programmes, and attracted audiences and media attention that would have been otherwise unreachable.

The initiative has not only led to a boost in international tourism and cross-border partnerships but also contributed to urban regeneration, civic engagement, and the strengthening of local cultural sectors. Some cities stand out as powerful examples of how the ECoC title can act as a catalyst for long-term development, cultural diplomacy, and the embodiment of EU values such as tolerance and peace. By enabling cooperation with artists and institutions from both EU and non-EU countries, the action supports the EU's cultural diplomacy goals and strengthens the cultural fabric of Europe as a whole.

Nonetheless, the evaluation highlights several structural limitations that hinder the full potential of the ECoC action. Notably, the lack of a formal institutional mechanism for knowledge sharing and the absence of a centralised database of cultural operators restrict the sustainability and reach of the networks created during the title year. Moreover, while the initiative successfully promotes European values, inconsistent political support and limited post-title engagement can threaten the impact of the title year. The evaluation therefore

suggests that more structured EU-level support (in communication, data sharing, and legacy planning) would be essential to enhance the effectiveness and lasting influence of the ECoC action.

### ***Relevance***

The action continues to evolve alongside the socio-economic changes and cultural landscape of Europe. Even as one of the EU's longest-running cultural actions, the initiative remains aligned with cities' long-term development goals, particularly in embedding culture within urban planning and policymaking. The requirement for bidding cities to develop comprehensive cultural strategies has transformed the way municipalities view and utilise culture, often leading to the creation or refinement of city-wide cultural policies. These processes are not confined to successful titleholders alone; even cities that do not win the title benefit from strengthened cultural strategies and improved planning frameworks. Several examples illustrate how the bidding process can stimulate the development of regional strategies beyond the city level.

The integration of the ECoC action into city policy frameworks often reinforces and extends pre-existing measures, providing legitimacy and renewed focus on cultural development. Moreover, the bidding process instils confidence in both political leadership and the cultural sector, often leading to tangible investments in culture-driven urban regeneration. These outcomes are particularly significant in the face of shrinking municipal budgets for culture: The cultural capitals serve as a flagship initiative that secures local political buy-in and provides robust evidence of the socio-economic value of cultural investment. Ex-post evaluations consistently demonstrate the leverage effect, generating broader economic and cultural benefits in proportion to the initial investment, which cities use to justify continued and increased support for cultural initiatives.

The legacy of the action remains at the heart of potential questions concerning the ECoCs relevance. While some cities have established legacy organisations, many others lack adequate long-term planning mechanisms. With many of the benefits of the title year only becoming visible years after its conclusion, the fast phasing-out of ECoC delivery bodies often results in missed opportunities to maintain momentum. Weak legacy planning, combined with data limitations and a lack of long-term evaluation frameworks, undermine the ability to capture the full impact of the initiative. Overall, the ECoC initiative has helped elevate the importance of cultural policy evaluation across Europe. Focus groups highlighted the growing interest in assessing the impact of culture, with many European city networks creating dedicated workstreams on cultural impact assessment. This suggests that the initiative plays a pivotal role in advancing the practice of cultural policy evaluation at the local level.

Another important dimension of the action's relevance is its potential to support regional development through collaboration between cities and their surrounding areas. Some examples show how the initiative can successfully decentralise cultural benefits and increase access across multiple municipalities. However, structural challenges persist particularly in rural areas and smaller municipalities which can lack the capacity to deliver required to participate effectively.

In parallel, the action has adapted to remain relevant to EU policy priorities, including expanding eligibility to non-EU countries, embedding a stronger focus on long-term impact, and promoting the European dimension. However, ongoing debates around the role and visibility of the European dimension, and the underrepresentation of environmental and digital

priorities in formal selection criteria, indicate areas for further refinement to maintain the initiative's relevance in a rapidly changing policy context.

#### 4. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The evaluation shows that ECoC is a successful flagship action of the EU with a strong cost-effectiveness with a very limited impact on the EU budget. Moreover, the action can have a transformative effect on the different candidates and selected cities as it requires long-term planning and the inclusion of culture in local city policy to be considered for the title. The action also has a strong coherence with other actions of the EU, in particular Creative Europe, and allows for the dissemination of EU values and of European cultural professionals and artists and their works in the EU and beyond.

The first interim evaluation of the European Capitals of Culture 2020-2033 highlighted both successes and challenges, offering key lessons for its future. The findings will guide the ECoC into its next phase after 2033, ensuring its continued success and relevance.

**A stronger focus on the 'European dimension' in the competition:** The 'European dimension' is a key element of the ECoC action and selection criteria. However, it appears that, based on feedback, it is often not fully understood by the different stakeholders. The European Commission could explore ways to develop the understanding of this dimension.

**Long-term knowledge:** Due to the absence of a formal ECoC network, there is risk of losing knowledge between newly appointed and past cities. The Commission could research how to foster knowledge-sharing in the ECoC community for the action to reach its full potential, in particular in relation to its European dimension.

**Communication:** The European Commission communicates actively about the official designation of the European Capitals of Culture with multiple channels, including press release, websites, and social media. However, there are currently no concentrated EU-level communication actions by the European Commission and other EU-wide institutions to promote the ECoC cities. This limits the Action's visibility, impact, and public awareness. The ECoC would benefit from EU communication efforts to support and complement the work of the title-holding cities, in coordination with and with input from the Member States. Appointing ECoC ambassadors at political level could help the initiative.

**Data:** The set of indicators provided by the European Commission to the organisations in charge of setting up the different ECoC competitions should be revised based on the results and data gaps identified during the evaluation process.

**Expert panel:** It is important to ensure that the expert panel has the skills and resources to carry out its tasks effectively. The Commission could strengthen cooperation with other institutions to ensure the panel is diverse in both representation and expertise. In addition, a structured onboarding process for new members would help ensure they are well-prepared and support a smooth transition and handover from outgoing members.

**Long-term planning:** The evaluation has shown that the long-term impact of the action is not experienced to its full potential in some cities. The Commission could explore the reinforcement of the 'contribution to the long-term strategy' criterion and strengthen evaluation criteria and indicators to foster longer-term impacts in the different candidate cities.

**In conclusion,** the evaluation provides crucial insights into the programme's progress and potential. After 40 years, the action remains relevant and well sought-after by cities and

territories to develop themselves through culture. However, it is important to update the action to ensure its continued relevance in the future, in particular by taking into account emerging trends which appeared in the recent years, such as an increased number of smaller cities as title-bearers.