



The future of the European Capitals of Culture 2019 and beyond

Position by “A Soul for Europe”

The concept of the ECoC was launched in 1985 with the aim “to highlight the richness and diversity of European Cultures, celebrate the cultural ties that link Europe together and foster a feeling of European citizenship.”

In the year 2009 at Forum Guimarães, the former director of the Avignon festival Bernard Faivre d’Arcier said: “(...)the disjunction between the criteria and the artistic project is widening. The vocabulary is the same for selling apartments. The arts are forgotten behind the facade of politically correct social objectives. Local politicians interfere with artistic leadership because they are interested in winning elections, their image and economic feedback, not artistic delivery. This leads to the believe, that numbers attending and media coverage obtained are the real evidence of success for a city’s year in the European limelight.”

Position of “A Soul for Europe”

“A Soul for Europe” (ASfE) regards this project as highly important for the promotion and formation of a broad understanding for the role of the rich and diverse cultures in Europe and the development of a pluralistic European society. The integration of “culture” into all spheres of action in European policy making is indispensable for a positive and continuative development of Europe, and a permanent concern.

The ECoC project can also lead to define and strengthen the role of the city in Europe and give it its special responsibility for the future development of the EU.

This great challenge can not be achieved by merely putting this collective responsibility to the ECoC – a joint and collaborative approach that embeds the ECoC as one of other initiatives is necessary to ensure that this project can fulfil its ambitious vision.

1. Substance

At the very bottom of the idea of the European Capitals of Culture lies the assumption that cities and regions selected “Capital of Culture” hold a special and unique cultural and social position that reflects the European idea of diversity and pluralism. ASfE regards this quality not only as pivotal for the decision making process but also as the major criterion compared to secondary interests and concerns. If this first criterion is met and a city is able to present and implement a formidable and convincing concept in terms of content, and in that regard is an actual cultural capital, secondary outcomes such as positive economical developments, the improvement of image and attitude towards and by a European society and further benefits concerning tourism and other cultural, political and economical dimensions are much more likely and sustainable. In the focus of the ASfE notion stands therefore the unconditional concentration on the promotion of the uniqueness of the respective city and the formulation of a concrete and reasonable conception in terms of content, substance and cultural distinctiveness. This also includes the formulation of conceptual designs for strategic and structural policies and the active role of the

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The **Strategy Group** consists of more than 50 young individuals from 21 countries. They are responsible for the conceptual development and dissemination of the idea of “A Soul for Europe”. The Strategy Group was built up and its work is made possible with the financial support of the **Robert Bosch Stiftung**.

“A Soul for Europe” is carried out by the **Felix Meritis Foundation** in Amsterdam, **Stiftung Zukunft Berlin**, the **European House for Culture** in Brussels and **Setepés** in Porto.

The **Cultural Front Belgrade** and the **Stichting Caucasus Foundation** in Tbilisi are associated partner offices.

The activities of “A Soul for Europe” are supported by numerous partner organizations from the field of business, culture and politics.

The legal seat of the EEIG ASfE is in Brussels.

city or region itself in this decision making process. ASfE sees the need to plan a programme that finds the balance between the relevance for local citizens and the future urban development on the one hand and the attractiveness of the programme for international visitors on the other, which of course lies mainly in the specific presentation of the respective city. Thus, these important claims should not just be represented “ideologically” in the city’s application but have to be implemented in a visible way into actual programmes and actions as well as in the working conditions and legal structures that are set up to programme and produce the ECoC.

2. Participation

The participation of the respective citizens – as dynamic consumers as well as productive creators – is crucial for an authentic Capital of Culture. In the explicit inclusion of the civil society lies the only way to implement a sustainable and structurally anchored notion for a Capital of Culture. In addition, the inclusion of civil actors effectively raises the attractiveness and visibility of the city and facilitates the entanglement of further citizens in a broader context. The cities' applications shall be evaluated on the short- and long-term commitment they prove to this objective: for instance, by their strategies to support the local cultural organisations/projects, existing strategies and consultation mechanisms etc.

The contribution of the Capital of Culture is first of all a “bottom-up” activity and thus should be regarded as a significant and self dependent contribution by civic and civil communities. This connotes that it is worthwhile to form this process not just in a collaborative manner of centralised “top-down” procedures but especially decentralised and diverse “bottom-up” activities. Hence, EU-representatives and particularly the European Commission and the Parliament are encouraged to leave control and decisive competency with the communal sector and to focus on fostering the self-organisation and self-control by civic actors (e.g. through a self-evaluation process as well as a visitation process). The Capital and its society itself are to be in charge of the conception and the programme design. This also includes financially, commercially and politically motivated parameters from “outside”.

Civil society and its initiatives must not be just “used” to gloss up the application. They have to be included in the planning and implementation process from the very beginning and be part of the process also after the ECoC has ended. An ECoC is an integrated project and not an added one. To provide this active role it is necessary to create new structures that allow for an interactive dialogue between civil actors and official decision makers. Against this background it should be possible to apply for the ECoC also for citizens' initiatives and not only for official representatives. Only a process that is transparent and visible can lead to the shared engagement and appreciation of the citizen community. This community can then conceive the ECoC initiative as “their own” subject and consistently support it.

ECoC has the chance of having international artists not only for the presentation of their projects, but to organize meetings, workshops, co-operations with local artists and civil society, to share knowledge and open new ways for international coproduction and new artistic developments. ECoC should be a place for developing (new) co-productions rather than as a place where to present existing artistic projects.

3. Sustainability and Learning

ASfE calls for a structural implementation of cultural, social as well as regional sustainability in the process of the ECoC. As pointed out above, this has to be achieved by the imperative inclusion of civil society. Sustainability lies in a revived and contemporary attitude towards arts and culture, in new or renewed initiatives as well as restored or new cultural infrastructure and in remaining working structures to produce the long term effects into real projects. Only by including civil actors at the “grassroots” level, a lasting and persistent impact of the ECoC initiative on regions and cities can be ensured. Herein lays the notion of a cultural concept that not only focuses on today’s state of societal conditions but in addition takes into account the cultural potential for feasible future developments. The time after the ECoC year is equally important to plan and conceptualize in order to allow for an actual sustainable project. Evidently the integration of the society and the sustainability of ECoC are linked directly. This particularly involves younger generations, not just as addressees but as active urban co-creators. Against this background it becomes obvious that existing local projects must not be overrun for the sake of short-term international events, but integrated into comprehensive long-term perspectives.

Connected to the concept of sustainability is the concept of learning. ASfE thus prompts the ECoC to be a European process of mutual learning. Whereas the European Commission can learn how cities and regions can play an important part in the collective process of building a diverse and common Europe and how this impact can be fostered on a European level, cities and communities themselves can learn from their own experiences. Thus the ECoC handbook should document and communicate operating experience by former ECoCs from an operational and especially from a cultural perspective and with regard of a positive impact for a joint Europe.

ASfE requires to regard everything that is happening on the European continent as a European achievement, a European challenge and invites all actors to contribute in seizing and approaching this European mission. The collective initiative of European Capitals of Culture offers an unparalleled opportunity to face this challenge and to promote a mutual cultural understanding of a shared Europe. ASfE can support Capitals of Culture in the crucial process of activating young civic initiatives, in international networking to promote knowledge sharing, capacity building and diversity. ASfE can also support the appropriate political implementation through debates, workshops and open discourses with civil societies and officials.

4. Challenges

ASfE emphasizes that one of the greatest challenges which has arisen in recent years is the tension between political objectives and artistic choices. It has to be ensured that the programme submitted for the application as well as the organization of the ECoC year is truly adhered to in the implementation of the ECoC and ensures a strong European dimension.

The implementation of the ECoC has to be controlled after the “title” is awarded. A self-management and self-monitoring process that is co-designed and developed by respective cities and regions themselves is eligible. This does not mean disempowering the EU-Commission of its general responsibility for ECoC. However, it should compose an independent monitoring authority, different than the implementing agency that is built. It should include local civil society (including business), representatives of the cities and regions as well as independent experts.

This “decentralization” is essential since in future more than (as yet) one monitoring instance is to be responsible for the compliance with erstwhile agreed on promises and conventions. This strict monitoring process is likely to be more effective and efficient when not being carried out in a “top down” approach.