THE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE AS A MARKETING MEGA-EVENT: THE CHALLENGE OF GETTING NOMINATED

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Purpose: Explore the recent evolution of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) program in terms of both selection criteria and the profiles of the cities nominated to become a one-year cultural capital of Europe

Design/methodology/approach: The case study was used as the research method. In this research, the case of the ECoC program was presented as a chance for European cities aiming at creating their competitive position based on culture and creativity. The authors have identified three subsequent periods in the evolution of the ECoC and concentrated on identifying the differences between them, referring to selection criteria and the characteristics of the awarded cities.

Findings: The evolution of the ECoC formula shifts toward European cities with better recognition of intangible heritage, smaller size, and lower administrative status. Possessing the tangible heritage assets is not the leading advantage anymore, and the chances of success are bigger for locations which had not been recognized before as cultural centers.

Research limitations/implications: The study is based on desk research, and no qualitative research was conducted. Therefore, the interviews with the city marketers involved in the celebration of the ECoC should be included in further studies for deepening the issue.

Practical implications: The paper draws some implications for practice for city marketers aiming at improving the international recognition of the city under the cultural label. The call for the next nominations of the ECoC is open for Czech, French, Polish, and Swedish cities, and soon it will be a case for Cyprus, Belgium, Malta, Spain, Bulgaria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Italy.

Originality/value: The paper identifies the current trends in designation of the ECoC; it covers the unique description of the nominated cities from the selected categories, which enables to assess the chances to be nominated in the incoming calls.

Keywords: City Image, Event Marketing, Place Marketing, European Capital of Culture (ECoC), UNESCO, Event Bidding.

Category of the paper: case study, literature review.

Introduction

Cities around the world are aware of the role of place image in generating development processes. They take action to use the tangible and intangible components of their identity to formulate a simplified but clear image message, one that would be attractive to broad communities. Nowadays, business topics are replaced by soft topics, such as nature, sport, education, and culture. There is widely accepted evidence on the powerful advantages while using art(s) and culture-based activities to promote a place (Kalandides et al., 2012). Culture became the chance for localities to improve their image, as well as city development itself.

Mega-events in the field of culture are playing an increasingly important role in the development of localities (cities and regions). These events serve to attract people from outside and within the city to spend money on cultural and leisure activities, accommodation, or gastronomy within the hosting location. Such cultural events include music entertainment, dance and theater, food, shopping, visual arts, and other cultural activities that improve the city's image and reputation in the minds of current residents, tourists, investors, and other stakeholders (Getz, 2008). A cultural mega-event, such as the European Capital of Culture, is composed of a set of cultural events of different scales that take place over the course of a year in the hosting city. Both the quantity and diversity of these events are large enough to appeal to a variety of cultural users with a variety of different cultural interests and tastes.

Our study focuses on the role of culture in building the image of the city based on the example of the flagship program of the European Union within its cultural policy, namely the European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Worth noting in this context is the fact that 'the EU is pursuing two separate and governed by different rules policies – policy in the sphere of culture and excluded from it audio-visual policy' (Sanetra-Szeliga, 2013, p. 361), as well as the fact that as of 1983, '[t]he leaders of the Member States called for intensifying cooperation in the field of culture, particularly in terms of the promotion of common cultural heritage, which is the emanation of European values' (Sanetra-Szeliga, 2013, p. 363).

The purpose of the paper is to explore the recent evolution of the ECoC program, analyze the characteristics of the awarded cities, and explore the relationship between the ECoC and the UNESCO. The following research questions were formulated:

- How do events/mega-events contribute to city image communication?
- What is the European Capital of Culture as a mega-event and how does it promote culture within the UE, across European cities?
- What are the differences in the criteria for selecting cities nominated for the ECoC title – in the past, presently, and in the future?
- What are the typical profiles of the ECoC host cities (in subsequent periods)?
- What is the relationship between the ECoC and the UNESCO Heritage Sites as well as the UNESCO Creative Network within the subsequent periods?

The role of events in communicating the city image

The notion of 'city image' was coined in 1960 by American town-planner Kevin Andrew Lynch (1960). As Marius-Cristian Neacşu indicates (2009), this term can be – and is in literature – understood threefold, namely as the sphere of mental image, as just the city image, and as an urban marketing technique or branding (p. 174). As a standalone concept, the city image represents 'the visual impact, as a whole, of a place or the general impression people have about a place or simply, the qualitative characteristics (positive or negative) that the name of a place evokes' (Neacşu, 2009, pp. 174-175; Cowan, 2005, p. 192).

With this basic concept in mind, it is now vital to present Philip Kotler's contribution to marketing theories before starting to analyse image-building in the context of the ECoC. The author differentiates mainly between slogans, visual symbols, and events as tools for an effective communicating of a place image (Kotler et al., 2002, p. 241). In this theory, a slogan constitutes a 'short, encompassing phrase that embodies and overall vision of a place' and that 'when integrated into a strategic marketing plan, can be useful in generating enthusiasm' (Kotler et al., 2002, p. 241). When it comes to visual symbols, 'a visual image needs to reinforce an image argument' (Kotler et al., 2002, p. 243). Importantly, it should be consistent with the message of the slogan. According to the author, there are four strategies/types of using visual slogans, namely *the diverse visual* (a variety of visual images about the place are used in order to emphasize the city's multidimensional character), *the consistent visual* (the opposite of the diverse visual), *the humorous visual* (the city is depicted in the humorous, witty way), and *the denying visual* (a way of diverting attention from the negative aspects of the city by overshowing positive images).

Having explained the above, it should be remembered that events can be of a very diverse nature and character. Getz and Page (2020) divide events into: cultural celebrations, business and trade events, art and entertainment, sport and recreations events, political and state events, and private functions (p. 59). Parallel to this, in it worth to present the typology of events formally recognized by the Association for Events Management Education (AEME) (Silvers, 2004). Along with such typologies, another relevant division might be that into inspiring, affirmative, pleasant, and enriching events, as well as commemorative/incidental functions (du Cros, Jolliffe, 2014, p. 46). Excluding the last category, it seems fair to say that the ECoC is an event bearing the characteristics of all the four types. Here we should also add that in the studied context, we also acknowledge the significant differentiation between stationary and mobile events.

Another category of vital importance for this study of ours is mega-events, i.e., events such as the Olympic Games, the Football World Cup, and the World Expo. They are among the costliest and most transformative human projects (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021). These events can generate a raft of benefits and costs for the host destination, both in the short and long terms,

and are commonly regarded as catalysts for development (Cornelissen, Swart, 2006; Swart, Bob, 2007). More recently, Roche (2017) has argued that mega-events always have the capacity to surprise us and provide us with a glimpse of broader processes and tendencies at play in global life. Events are collectively memorized, and they work as reference points in communities' social calendars as well as in the broader public structuring of time (Roche, 2003). Mega-events can include three main categories of events, namely sport, culture, and business (Ritchie, 1984; Jago, Shaw, 1998; Hall, 2006; Humphreys, Prokopowicz, 2007).

Müller (2015) put out four essential criteria for mega-events: attractiveness to visitors, media reach, cost, and transformative impact. According to these criteria, mega-events are 'ambulatory occasions of a fixed duration that attract a large number of visitors, have a large, mediated reach, come with large costs, and have large impacts on the built environment and the population' (Müller, 2015, p. 8). Mega-events have historically been the domain of rich countries, but in the past ten years, an increasing number of developing nations have realized the potential of mega-events to serve as catalysts for their transition to sustainable development (Jago et al., 2010). All of these events are attractive to cities, regions, and countries as part of their policies for urban and regional development and global image-making, and bidding for and hosting such large events has become known as the 'mega-event strategy' (Burbank et al., 2001, 2002; Kassens-Noor, 2019; Roche, 1994).

The impacts of mega-events have a wide range of potential positive and negative impacts for the host destination, and they are both short- and long-term (Hiller, 2003, p. 449). Further, mega-events are increasingly used as political tools and for purposes of soft power in the international arena (Jago et al., 2010). Table 1 presents examples of various types of mega-events with consideration of their division into those that are stationary and those that are mobile.

Table 1.
Categories of mega-events with stable and changeable location

	Examples of International Events	Stable/Changeable
Art & Culture Events	Grammy Awards (Music)	Stable
	Oscar (Film & Theater)	Stable
	the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Film & Theater)	Stable
	the Cannes Film Festival (Film & Theater)	Stable
	Art Basel (Art Visual)	Stable
	the European Capital of Culture Festival (Europe)	Changeable
Creative & Lifestyle Events	the Rio de Janeiro Carnival-Festival (Brazil),	Stable
	Divaly Festival of lights (India)	Stable
	Festival of Lights in Lyon (France)	Stable
	the New York Fashion Week (USA)	Stable
	Octoberfest in Bavaria (Germany)	Stable
	World Expo (Technology)	Changeable
Sport Mass Participation Events	the FIFA World Cup	Changeable
	the Olympic Games	Changeable

Source: Own elaboration.

Case description and methodology of the research

The European Capital of Culture

Large cultural and artistic projects (mega-events) and their significance for the development of cities and regions have attracted considerable attention over the last decade, both in theory and in practice (Campbell, 2011). One of the longest-running EU cultural policies is the European Capital of Culture initiative, which annually awards the title of Capital to two or more cities that deliver cultural initiatives throughout a year of celebrations (Jones et al., 2021). This marketing mega-event has been hosted by over 60 cities throughout Europe during the last 37 years. To trace the origins of this initiative, it is necessary to go back to 1985, when the European City of Culture project was first inaugurated. The ECoC was born from a simple dream: to unite Europeans through their differences, but also through their similarities (Richards, 2000). The originator of the project was to be Melina Mercouri, the Greek Minister of Culture. The idea was to make cities the center of cultural life across Europe and culture the center of economic development at the local, national, and European levels (Iordanova-Krasteva et al., 2010). Initially, one European city was designated the ECoC each year. After the special millennium edition in 2000, in which nine cities were granted the title, two cities have been appointed annually since 2001. The first city to hold this title was Athens (1985), while Evora and Liepaja will both host ECoC in 2027 (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Cities nominated for the European Capital of Culture – key characteristics

1985-2004					2005-2019					2020-2033				
Country	Cities	Year	POPULATION	City Status	Country	Cities	Year	POPULATION	City Status	Country	Cities	Year	POPULATION	City Status
EL	Athens	1985	XL	CC	IE	Cork	2005	S-M	RC	HR	Rijeka	2020	S-M	L
IT	Florence	1986	L	RC	EL	Patras	2006	S-M	RC	IE	Galway	2020	S-M	RC
NL	Amsterdam	1987	XL	CC	LU	Luxembourg	2007	S-M	CC	RS	Novi Sad	2021	L	RC
DE	Berlin	1988	XXL	CC	RO	Sibiu	2007	S-M	L	LU	Esch	2022	S-M	LC
FR	Paris	1989	XXL	CC	UK	Liverpool	2008	L	LC	LT	Kaunas	2022	L	LC
UK	Glasgow	1990	XL	LC	NO	Stavanger	2008	S-M	L	HU	Veszprem	2023	S-M	L
IE	Dublin	1991	XL	CC	AT	Linz	2009	S-M	RC	EL	Elefsina	2023	S-M	L
ES	Madrid	1992	XXL	CC	LT	Vilnius	2009	XL	CC	RO	Timisoara	2023	L	LC
BE	Antwerp	1993	XL	RC	HU	Pecs	2010	S-M	RC	AT	Bad Ischl	2024	S-M	L
PT	Lisbon	1994	XL	CC	TR	Istanbul	2010	XXL	CC	EE	Tartu	2024	S-M	LC
LU	Luxembourg	1995	S-M	CC	DE	Essen	2010	XL	LC	NO	Bodø	2024	S-M	LC
DK	Copenhagen	1996	XL	CC	FI	Turku	2011	S-M	LC	SI	Nova Gorica	2025	S-M	L
EL	Thessaloniki	1997	L	RC	EE	Tallinn	2011	L	CC	DE	Chemnitz	2025	S-M	LC
SE	Stockholm	1998	XL	CC	PT	Guimaraes	2012	S-M	L	FI	Oulu	2026	S-M	RC
DE	Weimar	1999	S-M	LC	SI	Maribor	2012	S-M	LC	SK	Trenčín	2026	S-M	LC
FR	Avignon	2000	S-M	L	FR	Marseille	2013	XL	RS	LV	Liepaja	2027	S-M	LC
IT	Bologna	2000	L	RC	SK	Kosice	2013	S-M	LC	PT	Evora	2027	S-M	L
BE	Brussels	2000	XXL	CC	LV	Riga	2014	L	CC	CZ *		2028		
ES	Santiago	2000	S-M	RC	SE	Umeå	2014	S-M	RC	FR *		2028		
NO	Bergen	2000	L	RC	BE	Mons	2015	S-M	LC	PL * 2029				
PL	Krakow	2000	XL	RC	CZ	Plzen	2015	S-M	RC	SE *		2029		

FI	Helsinki	2000	XL	CC	ES	San Sebastian	2016	S-M	LC	CY *	2030		
IS	Reykjavik	2000	S-M	CC	PL	Wroclaw	2016	XL	RC	BE *	2030		
CZ	Prague	2000	XXL	CC	DK	Aarhus	2017	L	RC	MT *	2031		
NL	Rotterdam	2001	XL	RC	CY	Paphos	2017	S-M	L	ES *	2031		
PT	Porto	2001	S-M	RC	NL	Leeuwarden	2018	S-M	LC	BG *	2032		
ES	Salamanca	2002	S-M	LC	MT	Valletta	2018	S-M	CC	DK *	2032		
BE	Bruges	2002	S-M	L	IT	Matera	2019	S-M	L	NL *	2033		
AT	Graz	2003	L	RC	BG	Plovdiv	2019	L	LC	IT *	2033		
FR	Lille	2004	XL	LC									
IT	Genova	2004	XL	LC									

City Status
CC - Country Capital
RC - Regional Capital
LS - Local Status
L - Local

Population Groups
XXL > 1 million
XL 500,000 – 1 million
L 250,000-500,000
S-M < 250,000

* The city was not yet selected at the moment of submitting this article

Source: Own investigation and elaboration based on European Commission Reports, 2021.

The ECoC program seeks to celebrate the richness and diversity of European cultures, improve the sense of cultural belonging among Europeans, highlight the cultural characteristics that all Europeans share, and promote the role that culture plays in urban development (European Commission, 1985). The program offers a variety of cultural activities targeted at incredibly diverse participant groups. The chosen city puts together an extensive calendar of cultural activities with the goal of promoting its artistic and historical legacy. The twelve months of festivities represent a fantastic opportunity to advance the city's standing on the European map (European Commission Reports, 2019). One additional ECoC will be appointed in nations that are EU candidates, potential EU candidates, or members of the European Economic Area beginning in 2021 and every three years after that. This is a recent addition to the plan (Montalto et al., 2017). This project has emerged as one of the EU Member States' and the European Commission's flagship undertakings.

The other side of this program was creating great competition in the selection process, thus giving more credibility to the event. In reality, the cities are using culture as a tool to promote the cities individually, with an accentuated city competition, while at the same time celebrating an official version of the European urban renaissance (García, 2004). As the ECoC grew in popularity and respect among Member States and cultural practitioners, real competition between cities began to emerge (Richards, 2000). Hosting the ECoC is clearly a unique opportunity for a city, which can result in positive cultural, social, and economic impact. Being a European Capital of Culture can foster social and territorial cohesion within city boundaries and beyond, and strengthen citizens' roles in the city's development as well as their participation in the shaping and making of cultural expressions. Being the ECoC can boost the long-term socioeconomic development of cities and contribute to forging an image of an attractive. The cultural activity in these cities increases and new audiences can be reached, and the city's cultural operators can acquire a more international outlook, thus improving their skills and professionalism (Montalto et al., 2019).

One of the most obvious examples of using cultural events to create a good image and long-term vision and planning for a city is the 2004 ECoC held in Genoa. These plans centered on the ECoC, which set clear deadlines and offered event and city planners the opportunity to incorporate rich, vast, and largely neglected historic urban landscapes. This strategic approach enabled the city to bring these diverse funding sources and projects together to implement a single, shared vision for the city's heritage and future (Jones, 2021). The other example is Guimares. This city was one of the cities that hosted the 2012 European Capital of Culture. One of the main outcomes of this event could be the reshaping of the image of the city, either by attenuating the most perceived negative attributes or by repositioning the city image according to the objectives and goals of the strategic communication plan tailored by the Portuguese organizers of the ECoC (Remoaldo, 2014). Finally, the 2017 ECoC case study in Paphos shows how a small town of just 35,000 people used the existing context to benefit the event. The city has revitalized culturally-focused events to integrate the region's natural, cultural, and social values, in this way, reinvent the city. Pafos 2017, the leading decision-making body, has developed a plan to use community resources to acknowledge, rather than ignore, the city's problems and build on its strengths (Dova et al., 2021).

Methodology of the research

Desk research on the legal acts on the European City of Culture and later the European Capital of Culture was conducted. Attention was paid to both the detail of the regulations and their substantive importance for candidate cities.

The period under review, 1985-2027, was divided into 3, taking into account separate regulations adopted by the European Commission. A total of 77 cities that were nominated to and became the ECoC were investigated. For subsequent periods, it was 31 cities (1985-2004), 29 cities (2005-2019), and 17 cities (2020-2027), respectively. The cities under investigation are presented on figure 1 below, taking into account the periods in which they were nominated. It was assumed that it would be reasonable to use the following forms of visualization:

- maps making it possible to assess the geographical distribution of cities, show their population size and the UNESCO status in subsequent periods,
- tables containing cities in subsequent periods along with information on their country, population size, administrative status, the UNESCO status, the place in the ranking of the Creative Cities Monitor.

Figure 1. Location of European Capitals of Culture over the three subsequent periods.

Source: Our elaboration and investigation based on Google Maps, 2023.

It was assumed that there were differences in the profiles of the nominated cities in each analyzed period. The following characteristics of the cities were selected and became the subject of comparison:

- size of the city measured by the number of inhabitants (S-M – up to 250,000; L – 250,000-500,000; XL – 500,000-1 million; XXL – >1 million),
- the creative and cultural ranking position – the Creative and Cultural Cities Monitor 2019,
- administration status (CC – capital of the country; – CR capital of the region; LC – local capital; L – local city),
- the UNESCO status and date of its obtainment (the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network).

Findings

The ECoC's selecting criteria

Formally speaking, the criteria that cities or regions must fulfil in order to be considered for the title of the European Capital of Culture have been changing over the years, evolving into a more inclusive and diversity-oriented framework. Below is the description of the subsequent periods and calls.

'The European City of Culture' – from 1985 onwards

Decision No. 85/C 153/02, which marked the beginning of the Initiative, was only half a page long. There were only three points: "Purpose and Content", "Selection Criteria", and "Organization and Funding". The selection criteria part only introduces the idea that a European City of Culture should be elected annually, followed by the member states hosting the event, in alphabetical order. The only criteria during this period focused on culture. In the purpose and content part, the desirable city uses the key-phrases such as 'cultural expression', 'diversity', 'helping to bring the peoples of Member States together', and 'opening up the people of Europe under special circumstances'. Between 1985 and 2005, one city was able to hold the title, but in 2000, nine cities were selected (Avignon, Bergen, Bologna, Brussels, Helsinki, Kraków, Prague Reykjavik, Santiago de Compostela). These were all large, important and recognizable centers (e.g., Dublin, Madrid, Amsterdam, Florence, Berlin, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Athens, Porto).

The European Capital of Culture – 2005-2019

With the next call, announced in 1999 (Decision 1419/1999/EC) – and then in Decision No. 1622/2006 which slightly changed the criteria for the period 2013–2021 – the document was reduced to 2.5 pages of legal character. There were relevant details and two annexes, namely the Rules for Eligibility to be Appointed European Capital of Culture. The goal focused on identity and culture. In summary, the criteria were as follows:

"Highlight the artistic movements and styles shared by Europeans", "Promote events in which cultural workers from other cities of the Member States participate", "Lead towards lasting cultural cooperation", "Creative support and develop work, ensure the mobilization and participation of a wide range of people, the population section, and the social effects of action", "Promote the widest possible dissemination of various events", "Promote dialogue between European cultures", "Optimize openness and understanding of others", "Historic heritage of the city, urban architecture", "Take advantage of the quality of life".

Meanwhile, two cities have won the title, with the event shifting more and more decisively to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This is because one of the goals was to open the door to the region. However, during this period, well-known cities were selected (Luxembourg, Linz, Liverpool) as the ECoC. Also, non-European countries (Istanbul) and lesser-known cities (Kosise, Umeå, Mons, Aarhus, Valletta, etc.) were selected. It is worth mentioning that some Cities included their surrounding areas in their programs. Therefore, cities such as Pécs, Sibius, Tallinn, Vilinus, Maribor, Riga, Kosice, Pilsen, Prodwich, and Wroclaw (Luxembourg, Liverpool, Turku) were chosen during this period.

The European Capital of Culture – 2020-2033

The currently-in-place Decision 445/2014/EU is 12-pages-long and contains a 1-page appendix containing a calendar of events to which two (or more) countries are assigned each year. In total, the document contains 17 articles. Article 5 sets out the criteria, where development has a double character. Not only are there many other points and requirements that the city must consider and meet, but these points also fall into six major categories that did not previously exist. The application's evaluation criteria, which include contribution to the long-term strategy (with includes 4 specific requirements), European dimension (with 4 specific requirements), cultural and artistic content (again, with 4 requirements under this section), capacity to deliver (with 2 requirements), outreach (with 3 requirements), and management" (5 requirements), are the same for the pre-selection and selection stages, but are more specific and differ slightly in the questions to answer and the details to provide, especially if there are changes between the two steps, as well as for the monitoring and evaluation of the long-term sustainable impact (comparisons with previous capitals can be of interest). Thus, there are 22 requirements included within 6 categories. What is more, the requirements are not simple points, but, most often, very detailed sub-statements. It is noticed in this period that the size of a city and the historical dimension is not a relevant selection criterion, and the presence of cultural heritage is not a precondition at all; a city is awarded the title based only on its future program for the ECOC year and beyond.

In this currently effective call, two or three cities (or regions) have been determined to be eligible for the title of the European Capital of Culture, and the countries are listed in the attached calendar. For the time being, cities up to 2027 have been selected and nominated. This period (2020–2027) is characterized by much smaller, less visible, lesser-known centers and far fewer inhabitants. Examples include Novi Sad, Kaunas, Tartu, Bad Ischl, Oulu, Liepaja, Timisoara and Trencin. Perhaps the most prominent nominee is Galway, Ireland (2020/2021 due to changes in how long the city holds the title during the pandemic). The corresponding criteria for the periods are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Selection criteria for ECoC in the subsequent periods

	1985–2004	2005–2019	2020–2033
Corresponding Criteria	One City as the ECoC	Two cities as the ECoC	Three Cities as the ECoC
	Focused on Culture	Focused on Culture and Identity	Focused on Culture and Identity
		Highlight[ing] artistic movements and styles shared by Europeans	Contribution to the long-term strategy
		Promot[ing] events involving people active in culture from other cities in Member States	European dimension
		Leading to lasting cultural cooperation	Cultural and artistic content
		Supporting and developing creative work	Capacity to deliver
		Ensuring the mobilization and participation of large sections of the population	Outreach
		Encourage[ing] the widest possible dissemination of the various events"	Management
		exerting "social impact of the action	
		Promot[ing] dialogue between European cultures	
		Optimizing the opening up to, and understanding of others as well as exploiting the historic heritage, urban architecture and quality of life in the city	

Source: Our investigation and elaboration based on European Commission Reports, 2021.

Overall, we can clearly see the development and calling of both documentation and evaluation criteria over the years. At first, these were just a few very general sentences condensed into short paragraphs. For the second public offering, the documentation was expanded and made more intentional. It contains over a dozen individual items focused on the presentation of culture and organization. After all, a tender currently in force is a clearly structured document containing detailed descriptions of the many aspects and criteria of the tender. On the one hand, there is a noticeable trend toward more bureaucratic procedures. On the other hand, it is good that it casts light on the event from multiple angles, showing its importance and seriousness. Furthermore, it emphasizes that standards are becoming more and more diverse, inclusive, and innovative.

Our first suspicion was that what began in 1985 was, for a time, a recognizable city with a strict Western mega-center and an established, or at least very likely, cultural appreciation. However, as time went on and as subsequent large and prestigious cities took the title, policymakers also needed to include smaller centers in other regions. Ultimately, the overall profile and bias are leaning toward places with great potential rather than places that everyone has heard of. Upon closer inspection, we found that we were right. In summary, each official period can be further divided into two sub-periods.

In the first one (within each major period), large centers are highlighted, while the second sub-period selects smaller or lesser-recognized cities. Moreover, the trend is upward. Thus, for each major period, it seems that a lesser-known city or region is chosen. rather than a recognizable center.

Selected characteristics of the nominated cities across subsequent periods

Size of the city measured by the number of inhabitants

In the years 1985-2004, nominations for the title of the European City of Culture were received mainly by large cities (the XL and XXL categories). More than half of the host cities are centers with more than 500,000 inhabitants, and four of them are even over a million (Berlin, Paris, Madrid, Prague). Relatively poorly represented were cities in the range of 250,000-500,000 – only 4 centers. However, in the category of small and medium-sized cities (S-M), there were 9 of them. Within the latter category, it is worth paying attention to the small but recognizable historical centers known for their heritage resources (Avignon, Porto, Bruges). Their number of inhabitants is in the range of 90,000–220,000, so it is safe to say that these are M-sized centers), not small anymore. Table 2 collects cities nominated for the European Capitals of Culture along with their key characteristics.

In the next period (2005-2019), we observe a decrease in the population of the nominated cities. Only one city belonged to the XXL category, and it was the capital of a non-European country (Istanbul). However, in the XL and L categories, there were 4 cities each. It is worth noting that as many as 18 centers, i.e., 2/3 of the set, are small and medium-sized cities (S-M), i.e., those whose population did not exceed 250,000.

Even more interesting is the structure of the collection of cities of the third group, i.e., for the period 2020-2027. Here, in the categories of large cities (XL, XXL), none of the nominated cities were included. Only 3 cities represented the category of large cities (L) and as many as 14 centers were classified as small and medium-sized cities (S–M). There are even centers with a very small population, examples of which are: Nova Gorica in Slovenia (13,000), Bad Ischl in Austria (14,000), or Greek Elefsina (25,000). This means that over 80% of the nominated cities are relatively small, which may suggest that small and medium-sized centers have a better chance in the next competitions planned till 2033. Maps 3 and 4 present the visual of the cities nominated for the European Capital of Culture in the respective periods.

The cities' administrative status

The status of the nominated cities was also analyzed. Let us remember that four categories were adopted here: the capital of the country (CC), the capital of the region (RC), the local capital (LC), and the local city (L). Out of the 77 cities nominated for the ECoC title, 23 are local capitals (city with county rights), 22 are regional capitals, and 19 are national capitals. The last category are small towns of no administrative importance in relation to the surrounding areas (13), which are named in this study as local centers. The presented results show that over 80% of the nominated cities are centers performing more than local administrative functions. Detailed data is presented in Table 2 (City Status).

However, the distribution of these categories for the three subsequent periods is interesting, as we can observe significant differences. In the first period (1985-2004), nearly half of the host cities were national capitals. The celebrations began in 1985 with the Greek city of Athens, as has been mentioned before, but in the following years, also the largest European cities were nominated – Berlin (1988), Paris (1989), Madrid (1992), or Brussels (2000). There were also strong regional centers (Rotterdam, Thessaloniki, Krakow, or Antwerp). However, in the categories of local centers, there were only 7 nominated cities. In this group, only 2 of them do not perform administrative functions for wider communities, although they were undoubtedly outstanding centers of a historical and sightseeing value (Avignon, Brugge).

The second period (2005-2019) is more stable in terms of the administrative status of the nominated cities. Nine cities were represented by regional capitals and local capitals. The other categories were much lower. It is worth emphasizing that this means that only 5 nominated cities in this period were the capitals of countries and they were all relatively small countries (Lithuania, Estonia, Malta). At the same time, there was an increase in the number (up to 5) of cities not performing administrative functions (Sibiu, Paphos, Matera).

The third period (2020-2033) mostly includes cities that have not yet celebrated the title, but have already been nominated. There is no national capital among them, and only three centers have the status of the regional capital (Timisoara, Esch, Kaunas). The vast majority of cities are local centers. They either keep the status of a local capital (9) or are only in the category of local cities (6). Thus, there has been a clear shift toward centers that do not have additional administrative functions (Elefsina, Rijeka, Evora).

Place in the ranking of creative cities – the Creative and Cultural Cities Monitor 2019

The Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor aims to help national, regional, and local policy makers identify local strengths and opportunities, and use quantitative and qualitative data to compare cities to similar urban centres. The Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor gives users the ability to compare and track the development of 190 European cities using a wide range of comparable metrics for "Cultural Vibrancy", "Creative Economy", and "Enabling Environment", while taking into account their various demographic and economic characteristics. The Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor aims to take a wide view of a "cultural and creative city" by taking into account aspects of city life and environment that are not directly related to culture and creativity. The ranking of the ECoC based on the population index is specified in Table 4, according to the said Monitor.

Table 4.

Place in the ranking of the EcoC cities in the Monitor 2019

1985–2004				2005–2019				2020–2027			
Cities	Cultural Vibrancy	Creative Economy	Enabling Environment	Cities	Cultural Vibrancy	Creative Economy	Enabling Environment	Cities	Cultural Vibrancy	Creative Economy	Enabling Environment
Athens	5	29	33	Cork	2	33	1	Rijeka	47	53	20
Florence	1	17	34	Patras	56	54	55	Galway	3	16	1
Amsterdam	4	8	6	Luxembourg*				Novi Sad*			
Berlin	5	7	8	Sibiu	36	48	25	Esch*			
Paris	1	1	2	Liverpool	26	22	6	Kaunas	24	16	29
Glasgow	8	19	4	Stavanger				Veszprem*			
Dublin	2	22	1	Linz	21	4	14	Elefsina*			
Madrid	15	12	6	Vilnius	27	5	25	Timisoara	35	27	17
Antwerp	15	24	21	Pecs	49	22	44	Bad Ischl*			
Lisbon	1	3	23	Istanbul*				Tartu*			
Luxembourg*				Essen	35	31	26	Bodø*			
Copenhagen	3	4	3	Turku	11	24	8	Nova Gorica*			
Thessaloniki*				Tallinn	6	3	26	Chemnitz*			
Stockholm	6	2	7	Guimaraes	48	16	46	Oulu*			
Weimar	1	5	5	Maribor	46	34	19	Trenčín*			
Avignon	1	27	30	Marseille	39	34	31	Liepaja*			
Bologna	3	13	25	Kosice	50	51	49	Evora*			
Bergen*				Umeå	38	10	29				
Brussels	16	16	9	Riga	32	18	40				
Krakow	10	20	24	Mons	32	18	40				
Helsinki	6	9	11	Plzen	43	45	53				
Reykjavik*				San Sebastian	23	29	34				
Prague	2	13	15	Wroclaw	30	17	35				
Rotterdam	12	18	10	Aarhus	9	24	11				
Porto	6	5	38	Paphos*							
Salamanca	18	52	18	Leeuwarden	25	37	16				
Brugge	16	16	9	Valletta*							
Graz	4	12	9	Matera	5	20	22				
Lille	33	36	34	Plovdiv	39	37	39				
Genova	16	35	39								

*Data not available in the ranking.

Source: The Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor, 2019.

The Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor is a tool for monitoring and assessing local performance on matters relating to culture and creativity, as well as tracking changes over time.

As a tool for comparative measurement, it can identify best practises and facilitate learning for decision makers in government, business or the arts. It can motivate scholars to create new research topics and methodologies as a rich supply of data to understand the function of culture and creativity in cities. Rankings are not where the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor adds the most value. This allows identification of city-specific advantages and obstacles to fostering culture and creativity, which can then be used as information for the development of evidence-based policies. The Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor demonstrates that there is no one "formula" to emulate, but rather a spectrum of possibilities along which each city must position itself based on a thorough understanding of its distinctive qualities as well as the priorities and goals of the relevant community.

The important findings of this monitor for 2019 prove that no single city excels on all nine dimensions and that all European cities, regardless of size, have room for improvement.

The UNESCO status and the date of its obtainment

UNESCO World Heritage Site, UNESCO Creative Cities Network

When the European Capital of Culture program started (in 1985), the only criterion for selecting cities was the focus on rich culture. It was for this reason that in the first period, most of the selected cities were rich cultural heritage (tangible and intangible). It seems that there was a strong relationship between having rich cultural heritage and being selected as the cultural capital of Europe. Fifteen cities have been on the list of UWHC which hosted the ECoC and focused on a tangible heritage site that was used as a tourist attraction. Florence, Paris, Luxembourg, Thessaloniki, Weimar, Santiago de Compostela, Avignon, Krakow, Prague, Brussels, Salamanca, and Graz have been titled as the UWHC; before that, they had hosted the ECoC. However, other cities – such as Amsterdam, Berlin, Genoa – registered after this event for the UWHC. In the case of other cities that were selected as the ECoC, the whole city is not titled the UWHC, but it has several cultural heritages (see figure 2).
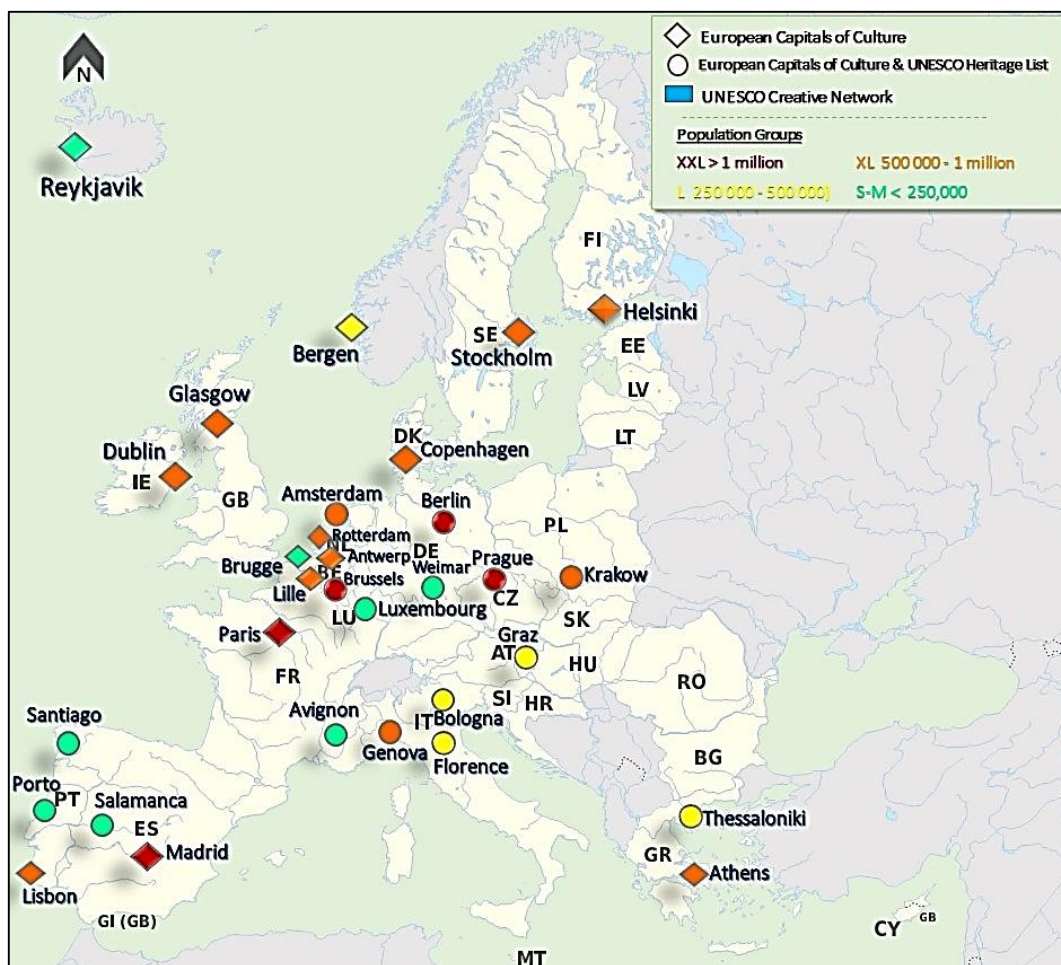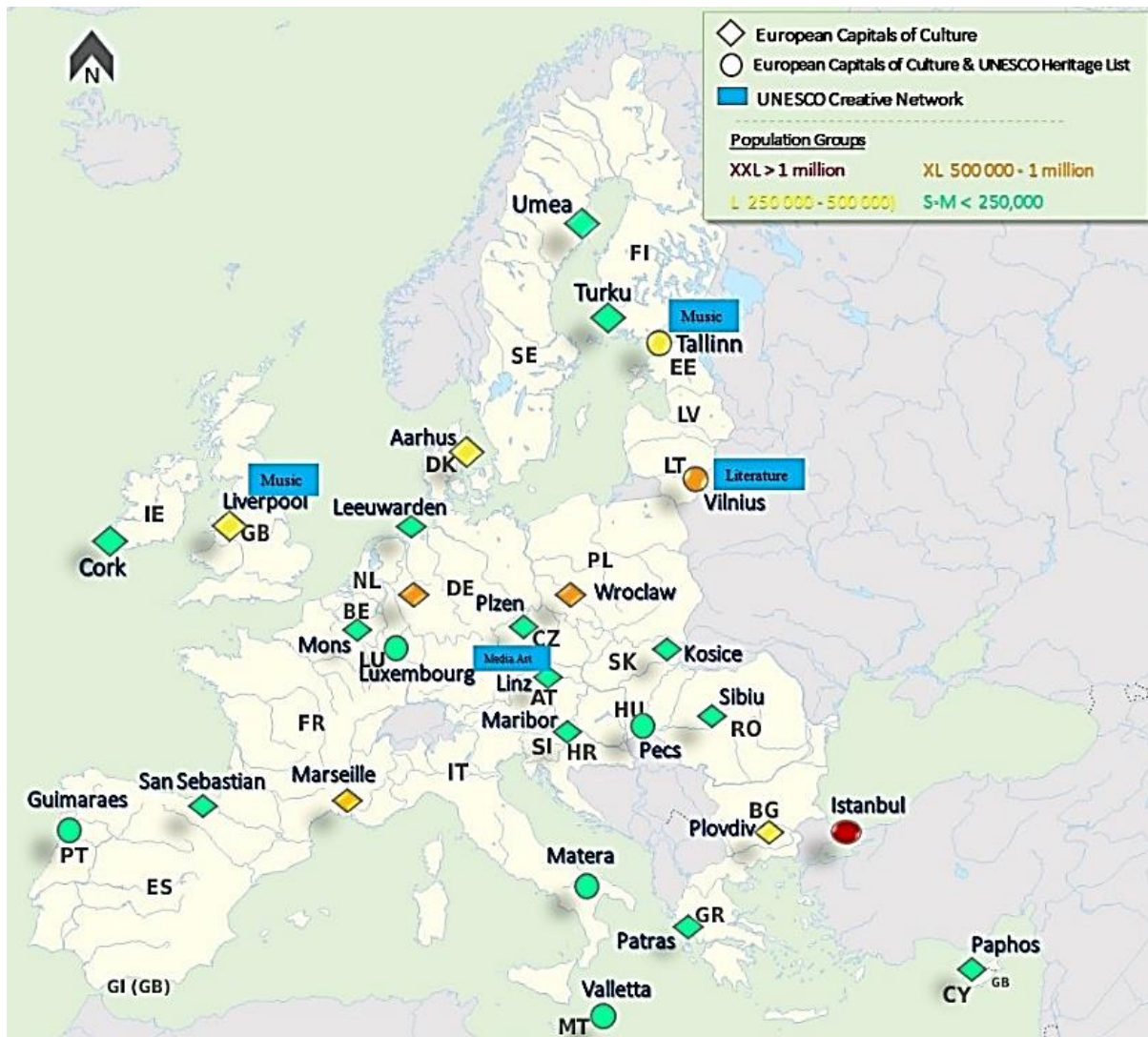

Figure 2. Cities nominated for the ECoC for the first period (1985-2004).

Source: Our elaboration and investigation based on Google Maps, 2023.

In the second period, i.e., between 2005–2019, the shift of European cultural policies from a focus only culture got redirected toward the preservation of cultural heritage and identity. From 2005 until 2019, twenty-seven cities hosted the ECoC. Luxembourg, Vilnius, Pécs, Tallinn, Guimaraes, Riga, Paphos, Valletta, and Matera had already been on the list of the UWHC before they hosted ECoC. Istanbul (non-European country), hosted ECoC in 2010 and have been in the list of UWHC since 1985. In order to identify the network of creative cities in this period, since the UNESCO's Creative Cities lunched in 2004, some of the cities were titled the UCCN, (e.g., Tallinn and Liverpool as the Creative City of Music, and Kosice and Linz in Media Arts, and Vilnius in Literature) (see figure 3).
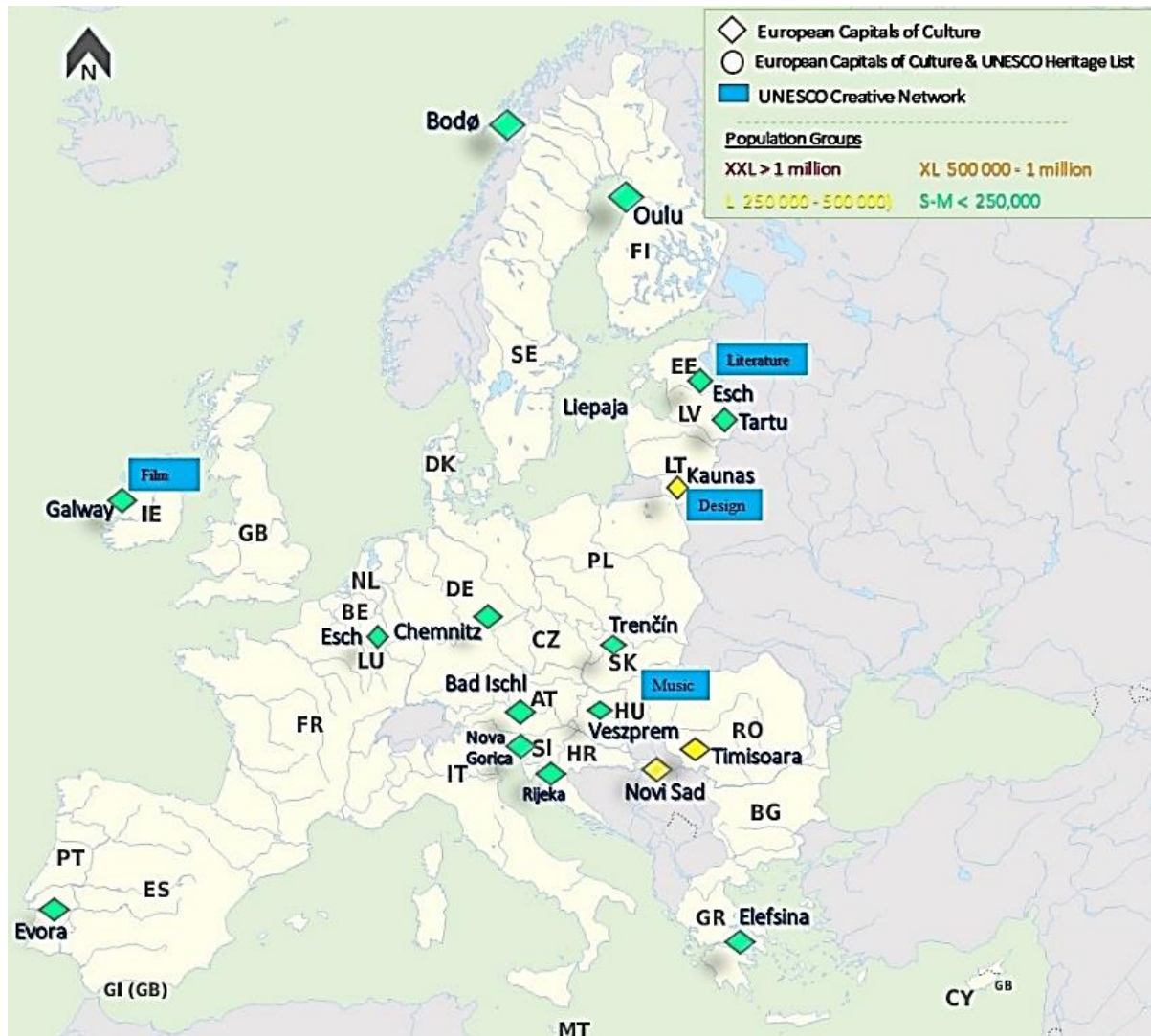

Figure 3. Cities nominated for the ECoC for the second period (2005-2019.

Source: Our elaboration and investigation based on Google Maps, 2023.

In the last period (2020-2033), the criteria indicate that the size of a city is not a relevant point. Although aimed at raising the city's international profile through culture, the presence of cultural heritage is not a precondition at all, and a city is awarded the title based only on its future program for the ECOC year and beyond. That is why none of the selected cities in this period are listed as the UWHC. The shift from a focus on conservation and identity in European cultural policy to participatory governance, intersectoral approaches, and a growing focus on the question of the relationship between culture and sustainability has led to changes in cultural governance and management. Both are reflected in the evolution of the debate (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Cities nominated for the ECoC for the third period (2020-2027).

Source: Our elaboration and investigation based on Google Maps, 2023.

In the case of creative city in the period of 2020-2027, out of 17 cities, 4 are in the list of the UCCN: Galway in the Film sector, Veszprém in Music, Kaunas in Design, and Tartu in Literature. It is noticeable that the pandemic has partly had an effect on holding these mega-events.

Concluding remarks

A review of international literature in the field of territorial marketing and the image of the place allowed us to highlight the arguments for city authorities, confirming the legitimacy of organizing mega-events, both those with a stable location and those with a changeable location. For the host city, the value achieved is to build a positive image based on a specific subject (sport, culture, business), but indirectly also to dynamize local or regional development. Culture is becoming a more and more popular theme in place image-creation. It is also significant to acknowledge that the very bidding process might benefit the city and result in its attractiveness after all, even if the bid itself was unsuccessful (Richards, Marques, 2017). This is connected with the the amount of work done with regard to the preparation of the city as well as the number of new contacts and continuing collaborations even after the bid ended (Richards, Marques, 2017).

All in all, our article made it possible to present the flagship program of the European Union created as part of its cultural policy, i.e. the European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Getting to know the essence of the program and the stages of its development in the following years allowed us to understand its specificity and significance for cities that were nominated to participate in this program in the selection process. The study focused on finding answers to the question about which cities tend to win competitions for the European Capital of Culture. Knowledge of trends in the previous nominations and the characteristics of the winners' cities will enable more rational decisions made by city authorities that are just considering taking steps toward participating in the competition. This includes countries such as the Czech Republic, France, Poland, Sweden, Cyprus, Belgium, Malta, Spain, Bulgaria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy, which will host the ECoC in 2028-2033.

The analysis of the size of the cities nominated for the ECoC allowed us to observe an interesting trend. In subsequent periods, the cities participating in the program are characterized by a decreasing population. While in the 1980s and 1990s, these were centers with above half a million or even more than a million inhabitants, in the coming years, the ECoC will be hosted by small cities, even those that have only several thousand permanent residents. A similar trend was observed in the administrative status of the nominated cities. While in the first period (1985-2004), nearly 80% of the nominated cities had the status of the capital of a country or regional capital, in the last analyzed period (2000-2027), over 80% of the nominated cities were just local centers. Most of the recent nominated cities are also not recognized in the Creative and Cultural Cities ranking (Monitor, 2019).

The study also addresses the theme of the cultural heritage of the nominated cities. In the international dimension, this topic is related to the activities of UNESCO and two programs of this international organization, which was originally focused on the protection of the world's cultural heritage and its preservation for future generations. Nowadays,

the UNESCO brand has become an unquestionable asset in tourism marketing. It authenticates locations around the world and elevates their rank and splendor. It is worth emphasizing that the scope of activities of this organization is the authentication of places and buildings, but also of intangible heritage.

An analysis was made in terms of the relationship between the two programs (the EcoC and the UNESCO), taking into account the order in which cities join them. During the first period of the ECoC's operation, most of the nominated cities had already been granted UNESCO Heritage Site status, or achieved it at a similar time period. This situation has changed dramatically in recent years, because in the period after 2020, none of the 17 cities nominated so far has had such a status. However, a tendency has been observed that among the recently nominated cities, the number of participants of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network – which is based on determining the cultural profile of the center, e.g., literature, film, music – is increasing. It follows that nowadays cities that want to base their brand on culture simultaneously use various marketing opportunities, trying to optimize the reaching of various groups of recipients with the message. According to the authors, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network has great potential for development for at least two reasons. First of all, being nominated for such a category is a fact that can be used based on the long-term branding strategy of the city. Secondly, it gives the opportunity to participate in a network of cities with similar cultural assets/values. Exchanging information, sharing experience, or undertaking joint marketing activities are just some of the values whose acquisition depends on the involvement of the cities participating in the network.

In the case of the European Capital of Culture program, the value of the nomination is not only the fact that the year-round celebrations are held, but also that the host city gains the ECoC brand forever, along with the opportunity to cooperate with the other participants of this great European project. It is, therefore, not surprising that many candidate cities are entering the next competitions, as they want to strengthen their international position in Europe in the field of culture through nomination.

The presented article allows us to draw the conclusion that it is currently possible to obtain nomination to be the ECoC without having world-class cultural resources, a large population, the supra-local administrative status, or even the UNESCO cultural heritage status. Therefore, the importance of alternative assets – which may consist of intangible resources of cities as well as proper management and marketing of proposed events – is growing. This paves the way for many more cities to strive for the title of the European Capital of Culture.

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