

# Feature Introduction

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## Researching European Capitals of Culture: challenges and possibilities

One of the most well-known cultural programmes of the European Union – the European Capital of Culture (ECC) – is a current topic in Nordic and Baltic countries. The programme has raised attention to Nordic and Baltic cities in recent years, and in addition, the nominations of the forthcoming European Capitals of Culture will maintain the interests towards these areas in the near future as well. Stavanger (Norway) was celebrating its ECC year in 2008. A year later in 2009, Vilnius (Lithuania) was one of the chosen ECC cities. The Nordic and Baltic ECC celebrations will continue in 2010 when Tallinn (Estonia) and Turku (Finland) share the nomination. In 2014, the ECC year will again be shared between Nordic and Baltic countries when Umeå (Sweden) and Riga (Latvia) are celebrating their ECC year. These nominations have evoked and will evoke fruitful ground for cultural and social interaction and participation in various forms. Besides the cultural phenomenon as such, the nominations have an effect on practical and political issues related to culture and the community producing and receiving its manifestations. In addition, the current situation produces a rich point of departure for researchers in various fields.

The ECC is a complex cultural event, and understanding its effects, structures and dynamics requires approaching it from various points of view and through different methods and materials. The previous ECC events have been approached for example from the aspects of cultural policy research, sociology, urban studies, cultural economy and marketing, cultural studies, ethnology, media studies, communication studies, journalism studies, tourism research, and the organization of mass festivities. The list of aspects is long. Multi- or interdisciplinary approaches could however deepen the understanding of the complexity, interaction and interdependence of cultural, social and political issues related to ECC events. The articles in this theme section focus on practices, discourses, representations and attitudes in cultural policy, culture, media and reception of ECC events. The authors approach the topics from various points of view – cultural policy research, cultural studies and sociology.

In the context of the EU's cultural policy, the ECC is a part of the EU's general Culture Programme. To understand better the discourse in which the ECC programme has been established and in which it is realized each year, it is necessary to view the broader objectives and starting points of the EU's cultural policy formulated in Cultural Programme and in other actions within it. The fundamental aim of the cultural policy of the EU is to stress the obvious cultural diversity of Europe, while emphasizing the underlying common elements which unify these cultures. Through these common elements, the EU policy produces an imagined cultural community of Europe, which is "united in diversity" as one of the union's slogans states.

In both academic and everyday discussions the European cultural identity (or Europeanness) has been approached in various ways. Some discourses stress the idea of common cultural roots, history and heritage as a concrete base for coherence in European cultural identity. Other discourses have emphasized the multifaceted variety of cultures as the main character of Europeanness – and therefore pointed out the nature of Europeanness as a civic identity. The most abstract discourse stresses both the unity and diversity as the key features of European cultural identity (Sassatelli 2002, pp. 438-440). This last discourse characterizes the EU's Cultural Programme. These two aims, the unity and diversity – which can be interpreted even as contradictory to each other – are encapsulated in the following description in the web page of European Commission: “Facilitating the flowering of Member States' cultures, with all that entails in terms national and regional diversity, is an important EU treaty objective. In order to simultaneously bring our common heritage to the fore and recognize the contribution of all cultures present in our societies, cultural diversity needs to be nurtured in a context of openness and exchanges between different cultures. However, in societies that are ever more multicultural, this diversity requires greater mutual understanding and respect.” (European Commission, Culture, Cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue.)

The objectives of the ECC programme obey the discursive context of EU's Cultural Programme. The objectives are described in the web page of European Commission as follows:

*[The event] must underline the common features and the diversity of European cultures. This diversity also refers to the cultural input from all the resident populations of migrants or new arrivals from European countries and beyond. One of the key objectives of the event is to foster the knowledge which European citizens may have of one another and at the same time to create a feeling of belonging to the same community. In this respect, the overall vision of the event must be European, and the programme must have an appeal at European level. (European Commission, Culture, European Capitals of Culture, Purpose and objectives of the event.)*

Emilia Palonen's article in the theme section opens the discussion on unity and diversity in the making of Europe. She asks if the EU policy narrates a common European history, or whether it will create a range of differences and different perceptions of Europe. As Palonen notes, in the ECC cities Europe and the European becomes articulated time and time again with different contents. Palonen utilizes the concepts of explicit and implicit cultural policy to approach the EU's cultural policy. Palonen suggests how in the ECC context, various types of official expressions of ECC management centres can be considered as explicit cultural policy. Actions which are located in the fringes or which are the effects of those policies as well as other fields of policy related to the capital of culture project, fall into the category of implicit cultural policy.

This discourse, which emphasizes both unity and diversity as principle elements in European cultural identity, includes inevitably a strong ideological dimension. The discourse rhetorically outlines the contents and values of European cultural identity. In the discourse, the concept of diversity refers both to local, regional and national cultures and to cultural characteristics of various minorities and immigrants in Europe. However, “common features” of European cultures are mostly searched from the traditions and manifestations of the local, regional and national cultures. This intention is emphasized in the EU's instructions for the ECC candidate cities. The cities have been advised to e.g. “highlight artistic movements and styles shared by Europeans which it has inspired or to which it has made a significant contribution” (Decision 1419/1999/EC), and to “bring the common aspects of European cultures to the fore” (Decision 1622/2006/EC). Paralleling the local, regional and national cultures and cultures of “new arrivals” in the discussions on cultural diversity brings

out interesting challenges. Tuuli Lähdesmäki's article in the theme section focuses on the various strategies in the discourse of cultural diversity used in the promotion material of Pécs, Tallinn and Turku as the ECC cities. As Lähdesmäki points out, the discourse of cultural diversity may aim to increase the cultural dialogue and eliminate inequality, however, dominance and subordination may be founded on the structures of the discourse itself.

As one of the previous quotations indicates, participation and creation of “a feeling of belonging” are core principles in the ECC programme. In fact, in the Decision 1622/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, the whole programme is divided into two sections: “European dimension” and “city and citizens”. The last section stresses the importance of activating people to participate in the production and use of culture. In general, these two sections are closely related – EU's aspiration seem to be to produce European cultural identity through activating people to participate in cultural events which represent the diversity of ‘European culture’ in its various forms (Tzaliki 2007).

The abstract idea of a common European cultural identity does not seem to exist only in the rhetoric of the EU cultural policy. As Eurobarometer surveys indicate, people in Europe perceive European culture as a distinct cultural unit. Over two-thirds (67%) of those surveyed agree with the idea that, compared to other continents, European countries have culturally a great deal in common. On the other hand, the notions on common European culture are profoundly complex. In the same survey, over three-quarters (76%) agreed with the sentiment that it is the existence of diversity that gives European culture its unique characteristics. At the same time this cultural pluralism makes about half (53%) of the participants to question the existence of a shared European culture (Eurobarometer 2007, pp. 3, 23-25).

The producing of cultural coherence, fostering the diversity and creating “a feeling of belonging” are not the only objectives of the actions in the EU's Cultural Programme. In addition, the EU seeks to promote culture as a “catalyst for creativity” because of the importance of the cultural sector to the economy. Cultural and creative sectors are seen to foster innovation in other sectors of the economy. In addition, “the cultural and creative sectors have a multiple role to play in local development, as they constitute a powerful catalyst for attracting tourists, are of strategic importance for growth and employment in cities and regions and have significant social impacts at local level in terms of social regeneration and cohesion” (European Commission, Culture, Culture and Creativity). As the article of Silja Lassur, Kärt Summatavet, Külliki Tafel-Viia and Erik Terk on creative industries policy in Tallinn indicates, the ECC programme is closely intertwined with the sphere of economics. The ECC programme produces a dynamic ground for development of creative industries and social innovations, which in their turn, have an effect on policy making and policy formation in the city.

In addition to the fostering of creative industries, tourism and place promotion are some important elements of the close relation between ECC programme and the sphere of economics. Several examples from the former ECC cities indicate how the ECC year has offered cities and regions the possibility to transform the identity of a place and people into regenerating the economy of the region (García 2004; Palmer 2004a, p. 25). As in the case of the ECC, European cultural export consists of abstract images in purpose of attracting tourists, various cultural and social agents and investors. On the other hand, studies have also indicated how many of the cultural, social and economic initiatives taken in the ECC cities have proven not to be sustainable in the long term. The Palmer report demonstrates that it has been relatively rare that the ECC programme has been

taken as an integral part of a city's long-term cultural development strategy and assimilated into other facets of urban development (Palmer 2004a, pp. 146, 150; Palmer 2004b). Similar questions were brought to the fore after the ECC year in Stavanger – will the obtained networks, experiences and practises carry on to future (Rommetvedt & Berg 2009, p. 60)? Thus, these questions will also form a challenge for long-term research projects.

The EU's stress for economic impact of culture and creativity is paradoxical considering the share of the budget which the EU allocates for culture. Less than 0,5% of the EU budget has been directed to culture under the past five years (EU Budget 2010; 2009; 2008; 2007; 2006). The ECC programme embodies only a few per cent of the budget of the EU's Cultural Programme. In the years 2000-2006, 500 000 Euros were earmarked for each ECC city. According to the Palmer report, the total amount of EU support for a ECC city represented in average only 1,19% of the total funding generated for ECC cities in the period 1995-2004 (Palmer 2004a, p. 181). Even though, in the new Culture Programme launched in 2007, the amount of financial support for each ECC city has been increased to 1,5 million Euros, the EU funding still only adds up to a fraction of the total budgets of the ECC cities, as Palonen points out in her article.

However, the nomination for ECC has an enormous symbolic meaning for the citizens in the ECC cities. The nomination also influences to the citizens' attitudes and belief systems on cultural and social issues. Knud Knudsen's article in the theme section explores how the ECC as a large-scale cultural event affects attitudes towards alternative impulses and foreign peoples. The idea of fostering cultural diversity and knowledge of cultural differences, which is being emphasised in the rhetoric of the EU cultural policy, does not seem to automatically lead towards more tolerant attitudes among the citizens in the ECC cities. As Knudsen indicates, limited access to ECC events in Stavanger 2008 provoked negative reactions and cultural scepticism (in terms of the intolerance for cultural diversity) in those areas where people had fewer opportunities to be involved.

Besides the symbolic, cultural, social and economic meanings, the nomination for ECC influences directly a great number of cultural actors, artists and performers in the nominated cities. These people hold key positions in realizing the aims and the abstract contents of the ECC programme as various abstract and ambiguous concepts are given a concrete form in art works, performances and projects during the ECC year. One of the interesting objectives of the ECC research could be to focus on the contents of various artistic and cultural products and to analyse the meanings and the meaning making process around them.

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