Identity politics of the European Capital of Culture initiative and the audience reception of cultural events compared

Tuuli Lähdesmäki

Tuuli Lähdesmäki
PhD Tuuli Lähdesmäki is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research focuses on identity politics, urban space, and discursive meaning-making processes in the contemporary culture. She has written various scientific publications on these topics. In her current research project, titled ‘Identity politics in Pécs, Tallinn and Turku as European Capitals of Culture (ID-ECC)’, funded by the Academy of Finland, she explores the EU cultural policy and its impacts on the cultural production and reception at the local, regional, national, and European levels.

E-mail: tuuli.lahdesmaki@jyu.fi

Web page: https://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/taiku/opiskelu/taidehistoria/hlokunta/lahdesmaki

This article is downloaded from www.idunn.no. Any reproduction or systematic distribution in any form is forbidden without clarification from the copyright holder.

© Högskolan i Borås, Nordisk kulturpolitisk tidskrift, Vol 16, 2013, № 02, 340-365
Abstract

The European Capital of Culture (ECOC) is one of the EU’s longest running cultural initiatives. It has an identity political focus: The designation as an ECOC requires cities to plan cultural events which foster and bring to the fore local, regional, and European cultures and identities, and moreover, present the local culture as European. How are these identity political aims mediated to the audiences of the ECOC events? The article investigates the reception of cultural events in three recent ECOCs – Pécs2010, Tallinn2011, and Turku2011 – on the basis of a questionnaire study conducted among the audiences. With the methods of statistical and discourse analysis, the article explores how the audiences perceived area-based identities to be represented in the ECOC events. The study indicates that, unlike policy aims, the audiences emphasized national culture as the most important focus of the ECOC events.

Keywords: the European Capital of Culture, Europeanness, discourse, identity, identity politics, locality, national culture, reception, regionality
Introduction: identity politics in the European Capital of Culture initiative

During recent decades, cultural political aims have become more significant in the EU policy-making (Sassatelli 2009; Näss 2010; O’Callaghan 2011). In addition, the EU has started to pay more and more attention to the cultural identity of its citizens and promote their identification with Europe (Stråth 2002; Shore 2000; 2004). The EU’s cultural initiatives function as concrete policy instruments in this ‘identity work’ on the institutional level. The European Capital of Culture (ECOC) is one of the longest running cultural initiatives. Since 1985, the EU has designated cities as European Cities of Culture for a year at a time in order to bring to the fore common culture and cultural diversity among European countries. In 1999, the initiative was given a regular legal base when it was transformed into a Community action of the European Parliament and Council. The establishment of the initiative – renamed as the European Capital of Culture – enabled the EU to formulate a more detailed set of regulations, instructions, and suggestions for its implementation (Oerters & Mittag 2008).

The establishment of the ECOC initiative strengthened its identity political focus. The clarified emphasis of the initiative was expressed in the first decision of the ECOC in 1999 as follows: the “initiative is important both for strengthening local and regional identity and for fostering European integration” (Decision 1419/1999/EC). In the second decision on the ECOC in 2006, the emphasis on local, regional, and European identity was elaborated to two pillars – ‘the European Dimension’ and ‘City and Citizens’. In the decision, the ‘European Dimension’ aims to “foster cooperation between cultural operators, artists and cities from the relevant Member States”, “highlight the richness of cultural diversity in Europe”, and “bring common aspects of European cultures to the fore”, while the pillar of ‘City and Citizens’ aims to “foster the participation of the citizens living in the city and its surroundings” and increase “the long-term cultural and social development of the city” (Decision 1622/2006/EC).

These two pillars are closely related in both practice and the policy rhetoric – the EU’s aspiration is to produce a common European cultural identity through activating people to participate in cultural events that represent ‘European culture’ in its various forms (Tsaliki 2007). In general, the emphasis on common cultural aspects in Europe indicates one of the underlying ideologies of the ECOC designation: creating and fostering a shared European cultural identity. The EU’s Guide for cities applying for the title of European Capital of Culture gives some practical suggestions on how cities should bring to the fore the common aspects of European cultures:

[...] candidate cities must present the role they have played in European culture, their links with Europe, their place in it and their sense of belonging. They must also demonstrate their current participation in European artistic and cultural life, alongside their own specific features. (Guide 2009, p. 12.)

The fundamental policy of the initiative is to get the cities to present themselves and their culture as part of the common European culture – to present the local as European (Lähdesmäki 2012a). National identity or culture is not evoked in the policy rhetoric of the initiative. This is in line with the EU policy rhetoric in general: it relies on the idea of ‘the Europe of regions’ in which the regional level is more emphasized than the national level.
Diverse identity issues in the context of the ECOC initiative have been previously researched through an analysis of policy documents (e.g., Sassatelli 2002; 2009; Lassur, Tafel-Viia, Summatavet & Terk 2010), promotional material (e.g., Aiello & Trulow 2006), media texts (e.g., García 2010), interviews of cultural agents (e.g., Bergsgard & Vassenden 2011; Campbell 2011), and managers and decision-makers on local and EU-levels (e.g., Sassatelli 2002; 2009; Lassur, Tafel-Viia, Summatavet & Terk 2010; Richards & Rotariu 2011). The impact of the ECOC designation to the city image has been studied through surveys among both the resident and non-resident visitors (e.g., Richards & Wilson 2004). The research on the audiences in the ECOCs has often focused on marketing and promotional purposes aiming to explore the economic impact of the event, e.g., through hotel stays and tourist flows (e.g., Palmer 2004; Richards & Rotariu 2011). Even though identity political issues are the core focus of the ECOC initiative, studies still lack a deeper analysis of the audience reception of the ECOC events from an identity political point of view.

This article investigates how the EU’s identity political aims are mediated to the reception of the ECOC events among their diverse audiences. The starting point in the study is the hypothesis that many of the ECOC events deal with and discuss issues which could be associated with local, regional, national, or European culture and identity. Designated cities follow the EU’s policy aims in planning and implementing the manifold cultural program during the ECOC year, because it is a prerequisite for designation. The promotional rhetoric in designated cities brings to the fore – and in some cases even highlights – the ECOC events as connected to these area-based cultures and identities. Moreover, diverse cultural projects and performances in the ECOC program are often introduced in the local media, advertisements, opening speeches, and the contents of the events as local, regional, national, and/or European. Thus, the ECOC initiative creates an identity political interpretational frame for the cultural year that directs not only the planning and implementation of it but also the reception of the ECOC events. However, audiences have various notions on how the ECOC events represent and bring to the fore local, regional, national and European cultures and identities, and what kinds of identity politics the ECOC events should eventually focus on.

I will focus on identity politics in the ECOC initiative from the point of view of audience reception in three recent ECOCs: Pécs (Hungary), Tallinn (Estonia), and Turku (Finland). These host countries do not belong to the ‘Western European core’ of the EU but have joined the union at a later stage (in 1995 and 2004). The countries are geographically located in the eastern and northern borders of the Union. On one hand, the countries have all sought to present themselves as European. On the other hand, in all countries national or nationalist discussions and movements have strengthened during the recent years. Thus, Pécs, Tallinn, and Turku form an interesting group of ECOCs for studying the notions and perceptions of area-based identities and their interdependence. Particularly, the idea of Europeanness and its relation to locality, regionality, and national identity and culture forms a fruitful point of departure for the study.

The main research questions in the article are: How do the audiences in the case cities perceive locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness to be represented in the ECOC events? How are the relations of these area-based identities constructed and defined in the reception of events? The investigation is based on a questionnaire study conducted among the audiences in the case cities. The design of the questionnaire was based on the multifaceted meanings and understandings of the contents of area-based identities. The meanings or contents of the concepts of area-based identities were not explained or defined in the questionnaire: the respondents were instructed to concretize and describe them in responses to open questions according to their own understanding. However, the focus and the context of the study (i.e. cultural events and cultural
representations) directed the respondents to perceive the area-based identities as cultural identities rather than, e.g., understanding them in the sense of citizenship or as a civic status. The area-based identities were thus contextualized in the design of the study as entities which are formed and can be recognized due to some common characteristics or features. How ‘cultural’ or ‘civic’ these characteristics or features are was, however, left open. In the questionnaire, the concepts of area-based identity were specified according to the name of the city (locality of Pécs / Tallinn / Turku), surrounding county (regionality of South-Transdanubia / Harjumaa / Finland Proper), and the host country (Hungarianness; Hungarian culture / Estonianness; Estonian culture / Finnishness; Finnish culture, which are referred to in this article with the concept of national culture as the questions focused on the representations at the national level). As the analysis indicates, the representations of area-based identities were interpreted in diverse ways in all case cities.

The investigation utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first research question is investigated through comparing quantitative questionnaire data collected from the case cities. The reasons for the similarities and differences of the results are discussed later in the article. The quantitative data is not only analyzed by comparing the results between the case cities. The audiences in the ECOCs do not form a coherent group but their notions and perceptions on the representations of the area-based identities differ, e.g., depending on demographic background factors. Therefore, the notions and perceptions of the audiences are analyzed in relation to the core demographic background factors – gender, age, and education – in order to find out their impact on the reception of the ECOC events.

The quantitative analysis does not bring to the fore the way the respondents understood the relations of area-based identities: Are they intertwined and interrelated or rather separate and distinct categories? In order to answer the second research question, the responses to the open questions in the questionnaire are analyzed using the method of discourse analysis. The theoretical discussions used in the investigation combine aspects on identity politics from the fields of cultural policy research, sociology, cultural studies, and European studies. The study contributes to these discussions by indicating how the demographic factors influence the notions of area-based identities and how these notions obey different theoretical models on the relations of identities.

Theoretical points of view and discussions on area-based cultural identities

Contemporary studies of identity draw upon a wide range of theoretical conceptualizations. Various epistemological turns, such as the linguistic, narrative, and cultural turns, which have characterized humanistic and social scientific studies during the last decades, have also had an influence on the notions on identity in these fields. Scholars have emphasized identities as discursive, narrative, and cultural processes, in which identity is constantly being produced, varied, and altered in different expressions, representations, and performances (Hall 1990; 1992; Bauman 1992; Bhabha 1994; Maffesoli 1996). In these views, identities, even those often described as ‘thick’ and explained as being based on ‘strong ties’, are seen as constructed and as transforming conditions rather than as essentialistic and unchangeable entities. The constructivist point of view to identities emphasizes their nature as varied and multilayered imaginings in the sense described by Anderson (1983). However, these imaginings manifest themselves in various ways in political, societal, and cultural spheres, and are very ‘real’ to the people in their every-day experiences.

Several scholars (Hall 1990; 1992; Bhabha 1994; Bohlman 2009) have emphasized the role of culture in the constitution of identity. With the concept of cultural identity, scholars have referred to
common historical experiences and cultural codes which are being repeated in communities through various myths, narratives, and symbols (Hall 1990; Giesen 1991). Besides the emphasis on the experience of unity through these experiences and codes, the concept of cultural identity stresses the significance of distinctions for the construction of identities (Hall 1990). Cultural identities are created in a constant dialogue, negotiation, and contest of similarity and difference, sameness and distinction. The constructed and multilayered nature of cultural identity is a fundamental point of departure in understanding such phenomena. Cultural identities can be understood as processes taking various forms with respect to a particular time, place, and discourse (Hall 1990; 1992). Cultural phenomena are both manifestations of cultural identities and spaces of negotiations and contests where their contents and meanings are formed. In this article, locality, regionality, nation-ness, and Europeanness are understood as discursive cultural identities, which are represented and manifested in diverse cultural phenomena. The concept of culture is discussed in the article in the anthropological meaning of the term. When discussing ‘cultural events’ in the ECOC program, the term refers more loosely to the diverse forms of arts and entertainment.

Since the late 1980s, regions and regionality in particular have received a lot of attention in political and academic discussions (e.g., Paasi 2009). In these discussions the concepts of locality, regionality, and Europeanness form an interrelated and inter-determined sphere of meanings: European cities and regions are often discursively formed and determined in relation to Europe, and similarly, Europe is being discursively constructed through different regions and localities (Martin 2011). Scholars have referred to this process as the ‘localization of Europe’ or ‘Europeanization of the local’. The concept of ‘the Europe of regions’ has been used in the studies to describe the phenomena where the “European” is becoming increasingly “localized”, and simultaneously, the “local” is clearly being “Europeanized” (Johler 2002, p. 9). In this process, nations and nationalities seem to lose their previous position while regions are gaining new importance. The EU-based funding for cities and regions (such as the ECOC designation) has created new possibilities for local and regional agents. The EU policy has established a situation where regions and cities have to compare themselves not only with other national areas and cities, but also with other regions within the boundaries of other nation states (Hansen 2002). The EU-level projects in the cities and regions have opened up new possibilities to elaborate them in cultural terms and to rethink their cultural identities (Lähdesmäki 2008).

At the end of the last century, several post-modern-oriented sociologists, such as Zygmunt Bauman (1990) and Michel Maffesoli (1996), predicted that nation-states would lose their previous position as producers and maintainers of identities, while nationality would increase its meaning among other private and individual identity projects. At the same time cultural ties above and beneath the nation-state level, such as religious and ethnic identities, regional strivings, and global and supranational projects, were predicted to strengthen. In addition, the increasing cultural diversity and internal pluralism in nation-states in the Western world has been interpreted to influence the identity production on national and regional levels. On one hand, these changes have been considered to increase regionalist and nationalist movements and activate interest in fostering and searching for regional and national cultural roots and traditions (Hall 1995; Hannerz 1997; Bonet & Négrier 2011). On the other hand, non-state-based forms of identification and particularly constitutional patriotism have been considered increasingly to replace state-based nationalism (Habermas 2001). According to J. McCormic (2010), the identification with Europe has increased in the 21st century together with the identification with nations, and the interest in cosmopolitan ideas and global phenomena may, in fact, strengthen the role of Europe as a unifier of Europeans and as a framework for the feeling of belonging. As a consequence of these diverse trajectories, the polarization of area-based
identities is increasing: the regional, national, and European identities are getting more pronounced expressions and manifestations.

The concepts of European identity and Europeanness have recently been discussed broadly in the academia. As the discussions indicate, the idea of European identity is profoundly complex and contradictory and includes meanings which vary depending on the discursive situations in which the idea is produced, defined, and used. In addition, the idea of European identity embodies political dimensions to which the discussions about it have often been included in political agendas both on national and European levels. As all area-based cultural identities, the idea of Europeanness embodies both distinguishable but in several ways overlapping dimensions of the collective and the individual. Actors shaping the collective discourse considering the European identity take a very prominent position on how identity crystallizes on the individual level (Bee 2008). The EU itself has actively participated in the construction of European identity during the different stages of its history. Several civil and cultural initiatives of the EU, such as the ECOC, have aimed at providing meanings of Europe and the EU for the citizens (e.g., Sassatelli 2002; Bruter 2003; van Bruggen 2006).

Scholars have emphasized the varied views on the conception of European identity: European identity is often approached in literature as civic (political) or cultural identity emphasizing either the legal status and citizenship, or shared culture, history, heritage, traditions, and values as the common base for the creation of identity (Bruter 2003; 2004; Antonsich 2008). Some other scholars have analyzed the dimensions of the European identity with a more detailed categorization. For example, Mayer and Palmowski (2004) recognize five different types of European identities – historical, cultural, constitutional, legal, and institutional – that have been affected by the process of European integration. According to Delanty (2005), ideas about European identity can be perceived as encapsulating cultural, political, moral, pragmatic, and cosmopolitan meanings. The cultural emphasis in the conception of European identity has often been interpreted as a ‘thick’ version of the European identity: it appeals to the (real or imagined) shared features and qualities. The ‘thin’ version of European identity refers to the ideas of constitutional patriotism and a cosmopolitan notion of European identity (Beck & Grande 2007; Pichler 2008; 2009).

In general, identities are often produced and manifested in order to distinguish oneself from the ‘others’ and to indicate both the similarity and the belonging to one’s own group. In this sense, the relation to the conception of national culture or national identity is crucial to the production of Europeanness. On one hand, the European identity can be perceived as being produced as a negation to a national or non-European one. On the other hand, European identity is said to be complementary to the national, regional, and local identities of people living in Europe (Breakwell 2004; Risse 2006).

A city, a region, a nation, and a continent – in this case Europe – are often discussed and ‘imagined’ in relation to geography. Their cultural identities are, thus, often perceived as area-based – an expression with which I describe in this article the local, regional, national and European scales of cultural identities. The areas to which a city, a region, a nation, and Europe – and local, regional, national, and European cultural identities – refer to are profoundly abstract and fluid constructions crossing the administrative or fixed borders of the territories. In this article area-based cultural identities are understood as discursive constructions whose contents are flexible and that may get diverse meanings depending on their definer. Thus, the same spatial area may function as an arena for multiple, even contradictory, notions of identities (e.g., Massey 1995, pp. 67–68).
Several scholars have pondered how the relations of different area-based identities can be modeled if people can identify with several communities at the same time (Bruter 2005, p. 15). Michael Bruter (2005, p. 16) has approached the topic by pointing out that ‘the subsidiarity principle’ has an equivalent in terms of theory of identities: several identities are coexisting – but they are additive and based on territorial proximity. In this model the individual identity forms the core of the model followed, e.g., by local, regional, national, and European layers. The model can be revised by emphasizing the relative strength of each additional layer of proximity: some layers are ‘thicker’ while some others are ‘thinner’. (Bruter 2005, p. 17.) Thomas Risse (2003; 2004) has aimed to illustrate the multilayeredness of identities with a ‘Russian doll model’ – which is based on ‘the subsidiarity principle’ – and a ‘marble cake model’. Particularly Risse’s ‘marble cake model’ is often referred to in the discussions on multilayered understanding of identities. According to the model, different identities are ‘enmeshed’ and flow into each other in complex and reciprocal ways: there are no clearly defined boundaries between, e.g., one’s national identity and one’s Europeanness. As Risse (2003) notes, it might be even impossible to describe what a national identity means without also referring to Europe and Europeanness.

The constructive perspective on the conception of identity emphasizes an idea of multilayeredness according to which people share various different identities that become activated in certain situations or circumstances. The same qualities and issues can be considered as markers of different identities in different situations or circumstances. The political and ideological objective of the ECOC initiative is to activate cultural interpretations of Europeanness, particularly in designated cities and their cultural offerings. This aim seems to have succeeded in the local reception of the ECOC events, as this study indicates.

Three case cities: Pécs, Tallinn, and Turku

In order to investigate whether the EU’s identity political aims are mediated to the reception of the ECOC events and how the representations of area-based cultural identities are interpreted to be represented in the ECOC events, a questionnaire study was conducted among the ECOC audiences in three case cities: Pécs, Tallinn, and Turku. The three cities differ from each other in terms of their social, cultural, economic, and political history. However, the cities have also several common characteristics. In all the cities contemporary art and culture have been developed together with old urban layers through public art, artistic events, new museums, and various other art and culture institutions as well as new or renewed architecture. The three cities have been flourishing multicultural and multilingual forces of their regions since the Middle Ages. Two of the cities (Tallinn and Pécs) are located in former socialistic countries, and are thus part of the historical East–West division of Europe. During the last two decades, the East–West perspective has, however, lost its former meaning and the old division has been provided with new – e.g., economic and cultural – content. The similarities and differences have had an influence on how the identity politics included in the ECOC initiative have been interpreted and implemented in the cities during their ECOC year.

Pécs, a city in southern Hungary with 157,000 inhabitants, was designated as the ECOC for 2010. Pécs is inhabited by a multiethnic population: many of the citizens have, e.g., German, Romany, Croatian, or Serbian backgrounds. According to the population census of 2011, however, only 4.2 % of the population identified themselves as (ethnic) German, 2.0 % as Romany, 1.2 % as Croatian, and 0.2 % as Serbian (Középonti Statisztikai Hivatal 2013, p. 119, per cents are based on the data provided in the table 3.1.6.1.). The main themes of the ECOC program of Pécs followed the slogan “Pécs – The Borderless City”. As the core pillars of the Pécs’s ECOC year, the application book
emphasized: lively public spaces, cultural heritage and innovation, multiculturalism, regionalism, and the city as a cultural gateway to the Balkans (Takáts 2005, p. 17). In addition to local, regional, and national culture, Europe, Europeanness, and common European cultural identity were the core identity political concepts in the promotional rhetoric of Pécs2010. The objective of the city was to celebrate “artistic achievements of European standard” (Takáts 2005, p. 11), “diversity of European and world culture” (Toller 2005, p. 7), and “own cultural experience and achievements which are likely to arouse interest in visitors and guests, those aspects of culture which contribute to the heritage of Pan-European culture” (Takáts 2005, p. 21).

Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, was designated as the ECOC for 2011 together with Turku. Tallinn is located on the shore of the Baltic Sea and is the largest city in Estonia with a population of 426,000. Today 52.5% of the citizens of Tallinn define themselves as ethnic Estonians and 38.5% as ethnic Russians (Statistical Yearbook of Tallinn 2011 2011, p. 10). The main objectives of the ECOC year of Tallinn focused on the development of the cultural participation, creative economy, international cultural communication, and cultural tourism (Tarand 2006). The identity policy aims of Tallinn2011 were introduced in the application book Everlasting fairytale, Tallinn... According to the book, “[a]lthough home to many cultures, Tallinn firmly represents the character of the Estonian people and their land”, and thus, “[–] it bares the responsibility of representing the republic and its culture to the world” (Tarand 2006, p. 11). The emphasis on the representation of Estonian culture was an important identity political focus of the book. The national-level emphasis was, however, intertwined in the book with creating and strengthening Europeanness. As it stated: “Tallinn’s leaders envisage the cultural capital as one part of a far-reaching process of transforming urban spaces into cultural centres and introducing Estonian culture to the rest of Europe while helping Estonians create a new European identity” (Tarand 2006, p. 17). The aim was to familiarize other Europeans with Estonian culture and transform notions of Europeanness among Estonians. In addition, many of the planned projects aimed to improve the urban environment and cultural infrastructure in the city and develop citizens’ ties with and feeling of belonging to their home town. Unlike several other ECOCs, neither the plans nor the promotional material of Tallinn2011 aimed to introduce or ‘create’ regional culture or identity. The regional elements were present mainly as parallel events organized in the near-by communes or in other towns around Estonia during the ECOC year.

Turku, a city in southern Finland with a population of 180,000, was designated as the ECOC for 2011 together with Tallinn. The city is inhabited by a Swedish-speaking community (5.3% of the inhabitants) (Tilastotietoja Turusta 2011). In the application book and in the promotional material, the main goals of the Turku2011 program were to encourage wellbeing, internationalism, creative industries, and cultural export (Helander et al. 2006). The program of Turku2011 was organized under five main themes that included: bringing culture into the everyday life, offering cultural breaks from the everyday life, introducing the maritime region surrounding the city, discussing issues related to identities and selfhood, and exploring the city through its history, memories, and stories (Määttänen 2010, p. 7). Besides local and regional aspects, the ECOC year in Turku aimed to emphasize national culture and Europeanness. As the application book of Turku states: “We have created projects that have far reaching effects and represent the driving edge of the Finnish cultural and business life.” (Helander et al. 2006, p. 7.) In the application book, Europeanness was defined as a value penetrating each project in the program (Helander et al. p. 37).

In general, the cultural profiles of the ECOC programs have varied greatly among designated cities. The ECOCs have often aimed to raise the international profile of the city and its region, to run
high-quality cultural activities and arts events, to attract visitors, and to enhance pride and self-confidence in the city. In addition, the ECOCs have emphasized expanding the local cultural audience, making improvements to cultural infrastructure, developing relationships with other European cities and regions, and promoting careers of local artists and cultural operators. (Palmer 2004, p. 14.) The cultural profiles of Pécs2010, Tallinn2011, and Turku2011 included several contentual differences. In Pécs2010, one of the main focuses of the ECOC program was in the cultural heritage of the city and the regeneration of the urban space through several major restoration and construction projects. In addition, regionalism and multiculturalism were emphasized in the ECOC program. This emphasis was concretized in various events which aimed to bring to the fore regional or ‘ethnic’ contents. In Tallinn2011, the program aimed to activate the cultural and creative industries in the city. In addition, the ECOC program included nationally important festivals and performances, such as the Estonian Song Festival. In Turku2011, the ECOC program brought to the fore various communal events which aimed to involve local people in the cultural scene of the city and activate the cultural participation in people’s everyday life. However, the cultural profiles of the ECOCs can be interpreted in various ways, and in designated cities there have always been various views – even debates and contentions – on what is or what should be the main cultural profile and core contents of the ECOC program.

Data and methods

The questionnaire studies on the ECOC audiences and their perceptions on area-based cultural identities were implemented in Pécs in April, May, and October 2010, in Tallinn in May 2011, and in Turku in August 2011. The data was collected in 23 events in Pécs, in 17 events in Tallinn, and in 21 events in Turku. The selected events differed greatly in their size (mass events, small-scale events), location (indoors, public space, city center, suburbs), organization (free of charge, at a charge), target audience (age, gender, ethnic, and language groups) and genre. Some of the selected events were festivals or series of events including various types of performances. The aim of the event selection was to include in the study an extensive range of events, which would represent the variety of the whole ECOC program in the case cities. The program of Turku included altogether 155, Tallinn 251, and Pécs 324 projects. However, the total number of separate events in the cities was much higher since many of them covered various types of smaller events and performances. The respondents (aged 15 and older) were selected during or after the chosen events. The selection was based on a focal sampling method (Mony & Heimlich 2008; Yocco, Heimlich, Meyer & Edwards 2009): the data collectors divided, in advance, the event venue (public space or foyer) into three to five imaginary parts and aimed to collect responses from the people who happened to be in the middle of the imagined areas. The data collection was carried out through self-completion questionnaires. From three to thirty responses were collected from each event depending on the size of the event.

The questionnaire data was analyzed in two stages. First, the responses to the background questions and closed questions on the concepts of area-based cultural identities were quantified. The possible relationships between gender, age, education, and notions on the concepts of area-based cultural identities were investigated through cross-tabulation, and the Mann-Whitney and the Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to indicate the statistical significance of the observations. Secondly, the open questions on the concepts were subjected to discourse analysis in order to find out the contentual interrelations and differences in the notions on area-based cultural identities. Even though discourse studies include several different orientations, its common point of view is in the emphasis placed on the constructed character of social entities, relations, and phenomena. In the analysis, some
discourses are seen to produce one version of reality, while some others produce another (Fairclough 1992). In this article I will define discourse as a particular way of representing reality. Approaching area-based cultural identities in a discursive sense helps to understand why their meanings are transforming in different situations and uses, and to diversify the views on meaning-making and perception of the concepts in the context of the ECOC program.

The questionnaire data consists of 893 responses: 200 from Pécs, 293 from Tallinn, and 400 from Turku. The age mean of the respondents was 37 in Pécs, 33 in Tallinn and 43 in Turku. In all cities the majority of the respondents were female: 58.0 % in Pécs, 69.2 % in Tallinn, and 67.1 % in Turku. In Pécs, the questionnaire was available in Hungarian and English, in Tallinn in Estonian, Russian, Finnish, and Swedish, and in Turku in Finnish, Swedish, and English. In Pécs, two forms were filled in English, in Tallinn 44 forms were filled in Russian, 12 in English, and two in Finnish, and in Turku 16 forms were filled in Swedish and 16 in English. A more detailed qualitative analysis of the answers in the different case cities has been presented elsewhere (Lähdesmäki 2011; Lähdesmäki 2012b; Lähdesmäki 2013; Lähdesmäki forthcoming).

Notions on area-based cultural identities in Pécs, Tallinn and Turku: statistical approach

The questionnaire study indicates that the audiences in case cities had various notions on area-based identities and on how the ECOC events represented and should represent them. The questionnaire included three questions in which the respondents evaluated, on a Likert scale, what kinds of impressions the concepts of locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness invoked in them, and how they considered that these concepts were or should be represented in the ECOC events in the case cities. The concepts of locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness invoked mainly positive impressions among the respondents in all investigated cities (Table 1). In each city, national culture was perceived as the most positive concept, while regionality was considered to be the least positive. Locality and regionality invoked the most positive impression in Turku, and national culture and Europeanness in Tallinn. Impressions on locality and regionality got the lowest results in Tallinn, and national culture and Europeanness in Pécs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pécs (n = 196-7)</th>
<th>Tallinn (n = 287-93)</th>
<th>Turku (n = 305-8)</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis test</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locality</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionality</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National culture</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europeanness</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

TABLE 1 Impressions on the concepts of locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness.

When asked whether the respondents considered that the area-based identity concepts were represented or if they should be represented in the ECOC events, the results resemble the respondents’ impressions on the concepts (Table 2). In Turku and Tallinn, Europeanness was considered to be the most represented concept in the events, while in Pécs the respondents emphasized national culture the most. In all the cities, the respondents considered that the events should represent national culture the most and regionality the least. In Turku, the respondents
considered locality as the second most important concept which should be represented in the events, while in Tallinn and Pécs the respondents stressed Europeanness. In Turku and Pécs, the respondents emphasized more than in Tallinn that the ECOC events should represent regionality, while respondents in Tallinn emphasized more than in Pécs and Turku that the events should represent national culture and Europeanness. Surprisingly, the respondents in Tallinn emphasized more than in Turku and Pécs that the events represented locality. In all cities, the respondents considered that all the concepts of area-based identity should be more represented in the ECOC events than they currently were. In general, the results indicate that the area-based identities were experienced as important and as issues which should be included in the cultural performances and events within the frame of the ECOC year.

Means in a scale 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = to some extent, 4 = a lot, 5 = very much.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pécs (n = 195-97)</th>
<th>Tallinn (n = 246-84)</th>
<th>Turku (n = 362-93)</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis test Asymp. Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locality</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locality should</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>.186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionality</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionality should</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National culture</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National culture should</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europeanness</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europeanness should</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

**TABLE 2 Opinions on how the ECOC events represent or should represent locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness.**

The identification of the respondents with the given concepts is in line with their impressions on them, and is also reflected in their responses on how the concepts should be represented in the ECOC events. In the background questions, the respondents were asked to mark, on a Likert scale, whether they found Europeanness, national identity, home country or region, and home town or village as elements important to their identity. Compared to the other case cities, local and regional elements were the most important among the respondents in Turku and Pécs, while national and European elements were the most important among the respondents in Tallinn. Local and regional elements were the least important for the respondents in Tallinn, while national and European elements were the least important among the respondents in Pécs and Turku.

Regionality was often considered among the respondents as a neutral concept, and a concept which is and should be the least represented in the ECOC events. The respondents’ answers in the open questions indicate that the concept of regionality was often considered as vague and abstract compared to other concepts of area-based identity. When asked whether the respondents perceived a difference between the concepts of locality and regionality, 65.4% of the respondents in Turku, 58.2% in Pécs, and 28.5% in Tallinn replied they didn’t. However, the same respondents often distinguished the concepts in their responses to the open questions. Many of the respondents in Pécs and Turku emphasized that the culture and identity of the city represented and brought to the fore the culture and identity of the region surrounding it. In Tallinn, however, many respondents emphasized the differences of culture and identity between the city and the county of Harjumaa, which was defined e.g. as “countryside”, or a “satellite” of the city, or considered as not having any distinguishable identity or culture of its own. The results may, in general, reflect the administrative
structure of the case countries: all three cities are in centralized countries with a weak or non-existing regional government level.

The background variables (such as gender, age, and education) of the respondents indicate some differences in the range of opinions on area-based identities and their representation in the ECOC events. The results indicate that in general women had more positive impressions on all of the concepts and they considered more often than men that not only all the concepts were represented but that they should be represented in the ECOC events (Table 3). Observed separately in each case city, the results do not indicate any major differences: women generally responded more positively to the closed questions about the concepts of area-based identity. Only in the case of impressions on regionality and national culture in Turku and in the question on how Europeanness should be represented in the ECOC events in Pécs, men responded slightly (but not statistically significantly) more positively.

| TABLE 3 Impressions on the concepts of locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness and opinions on how the ECOC events represent or should represent them according to gender of the responders. |
|---|---|---|
| Impressions on locality | Women (n = 513-82) | Men (n = 252-301) | Mann-Whitney test Asymp. Sig.
| **national culture** | 4.25 | 4.13 | .032* |
| **Europeanness** | 4.02 | 3.87 | .006** |
| Represent locality | 3.64 | 3.41 | .003*** |
| **regionality** | 2.73 | 2.54 | .014* |
| **national culture** | 3.73 | 3.55 | .004** |
| **Europeanness** | 3.83 | 3.66 | .013* |
| Should represent locality | 4.15 | 4.07 | .077 |
| **regionality** | 3.29 | 3.12 | .054 |
| **national culture** | 4.43 | 4.13 | .000*** |
| **Europeanness** | 3.98 | 3.86 | .119 |

Notes: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Analyzing the opinions on the representation of the given concepts in the ECOC events, the results indicate a tendency of the respondents born in the 1980s and 1970s to often have more critical opinions on the representation than respondents in other age groups (Fig.1). Respectively, a positive attitude towards the representation of the concepts increased as the age of the respondents either increased or in some cases decreased. The data indicates some differences between the cities in relation to the influence of age to the opinions on the representation of the concepts. For example, in Pécs the respondents born in the 1990s had the most critical opinions on whether the concepts, particularly national culture and regionality, should be represented in the events.
Means in a scale 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = to some extent, 4 = a lot, 5 = very much. Asymp. Sig. of the Kurskal-Wallis test in the parentheses. In the smallest age group N = 82–8, and in the largest N = 259–293. Notes: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

FIGURE 1 Opinions on how the ECOC events represent or should represent locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness in accordance to the birth decade of the respondents.

The educational background caused some differences in the respondents’ impressions of the concepts of area-based identity and their representation in the ECOC events. The respondents with the lowest education (comprehensive or elementary school, vocational education, or in-job training) had in general more positive impressions and opinions on locality and regionality and more critical impressions and opinions on national culture and Europeanness than the more educated (matriculation examination or higher vocational or academic education) respondents (Table 4). Opinions on the current representation of national culture form an exception to this tendency: the respondents with the lowest education perceived it from the ECOC events more than the more educated respondents. When exploring the impact of education to the responses in the case cities, the same main tendency can be recognized, however, with some exceptions. For example, in Pécs the impressions on the given concepts were more evenly distributed among the respondents from different educational groups.
Area-based cultural identities as integrated or distinct concepts: discursive approach

The area-based identities are represented in various ways in the ECOC events and their venues. Perception and interpretation of the representations of these identities is, however, subjective: the respondents make sense and give meanings to the identities based on their individual experiences and the life-world. In the open questions of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to describe in more detail how, in their opinion, the area-based identities were represented or should be represented in the ECOC events. In the responses the experiences and opinions on abstract identity concepts were verbalized and given linguistic definitions. The aim of the study was to find out with the method of discourse analysis how the respondents, in general, understood the relations of the area-based identity concepts. The analysis revealed an interrelated texture of meanings, in which the given concepts were discussed through two main discursive strategies: as interrelated and integrated, or as separate and distinct identities. On one hand, the relations of the area-based identities were interpreted as multilayered following the ideas of the ‘marble cake model’ or the ‘Russian doll model’. The identities were interpreted as ‘enmeshed’, or they were perceived as connected and co-existing with thicker or thinner layers. On the other hand, the relations of the area-based identities were not perceived as multilayered. In this case, the area-based identities were rather interpreted as forming their own independent entities.

The discourse of integration

In their responses to open questions, many respondents emphasized how the definitions and manifestations of the concepts of area-based identity were interrelated in various ways. Locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness were perceived as overlapping or integrated categories and their definitions as open, fluid, and becoming concrete in various ways depending on the context of the reception. When perceiving the area-based cultural identities as interrelated
and integrated categories, the perception usually relies on a ‘thin’ conception of identity. I call this kind of meaning-making strategy the discourse of integration. The speakers of this discourse typically emphasized the “natural”, “self-evident” and “taken-for-granted” links between the city, region, country, and Europe or the EU. A respondent crystallized these links by stressing: “Culture of Pécs = Hungarian culture = A part of European culture” (female, b. 1949, Pécs). The connections between the different levels of territories were often explained through natural interaction of the social, economic, and cultural domains and historical continuities. Thus, the respondents could emphasize the links between the city and the continent by describing, e.g., that “Turku has always been a part of Europe, thus Europeanness is a natural part of Turku. Turku is the most European and international city in Finland” (female, b. 1969, Turku), and “Turku is both geographically, economically, and socially a part of Europe – yesterday, today, and tomorrow” (female, b. 1968, Turku). Some speakers had even difficulties to perceive the area-based identity concepts separately from each other: “I do not know how to separate the concepts of what is Europeanness and Estonianness. For me, Europeanness is a part of Estonia” (female, b. 1977, Tallinn).

In the discourse of integration, the speakers usually emphasized the “diverse”, “plural”, and “multicultural” bases of area-based identities. This diverse base was often related to the “European modernity and development” (female, b. 1985, Turku). Thus, the plurality and multicultural features were often expected from the ECOC events. A respondent suggested how to develop the ECOC events: “More multicultural events in addition to our own Estonian events: e.g. inviting foreign performers and cultural events which have not yet been tried in Estonia; such as combining a flamenco show and Estonian national dances or other national dances” (female, b. 1982, Tallinn). In the discourse, Europeanness, national culture, and locality were interpreted in the frame of global cultural flows and increasing internationalism. Thus, for example, national culture could be interpreted “as a part of Europeanness and global identity (as opposed to clannishness and nationalism)” (female, b. 1953, Turku). In many responses the emphasis on the integration of the area-based identities took on politically-loaded tones when Europeanness, in particular, was interpreted as a (historical) base for other area-based identities. Especially in Tallinn, the discourse of integration was often used in assuring “[–] people to notice that Estonia is not after all an unknown and faraway country in Russia, but a beautiful and modern country in Europe” (female, b. 1989, Tallinn).

Even though in the discourse of integration the area-based identities were usually perceived as ‘thin’ identities, Europeanness could also be approached by emphasizing it as a ‘thick’ identity. According to these views, Europeanness meant common European “values”, “attitudes”, “cultural background”, or “history”. A respondent emphasized: “Europeanness and Finnishness are connected because the roots of the culture are in Europe” (male, b. 1943, Turku). In addition, the speakers in the discourse often emphasized the role of international and mobile artists as a source for an exchange of cultural influences and an increase in cultural diversity: “The artists from abroad bring us a piece of Europe” (male, b. 1982, Pécs). Cultural exchange was considered as enriching the area-based identities and blurring their borders in the globalized world. The speakers in the discourse of integration produced themselves the discursive subject position of an open-minded, modern, progressive, culture-conscious, and urban citizen to whom identities, in general, indicated plurality and diversity in contemporary culture and society.

The discourse of distinction

In the questionnaire data, many respondents emphasized the separateness of locality, regionality, national culture, and Europeanness, and considered it important to maintain and foster their distinct
characteristics. These respondents particularly stressed the meaning of national culture and its position as being opposite to Europeanness. I call this kind of meaning-making strategy the discourse of distinction. In it, the area-based identities – particularly national culture and locality – were perceived as ‘thick’ identities mainly based on unique cultural features and particular shared characteristics.

The main emphasis of the discourse of distinction is on the importance of national particularity and independence: “Estonianness is very important, because we are Estonians and we are proud of our own independence, our freedom, our free thinking, and the many possibilities that gave us our independent Estonia” (male, b. 1990, Tallinn). Thus, “[t]he Capital of Culture should emphasize the culture of the particular country, and rather not the European muddle” (male, b. 1981, Turku).

In the discourse, being a part of Europe was regarded as a geographical fact, but not as a cultural bond or a source of identification. As a respondent stated: “They should rather choose a theme based on Estonianness and the locality of Tallinn, because we are already in the EU. (Also, we simply belong to Europe geographically.) We could distinguish ourselves rather than belong to some single system” (female, b. 1986, Tallinn).

In the discourse of distinction, the emphasis on independence and the importance of national culture and identity manifests itself in the aims of maintaining and protecting them from extrinsic influences and threats. As a respondent pointed out: “In general, they should protect Finnishness, e.g., since all things cannot anymore be called Finnish. For example, Iittala, Marimekko, and so on, are not anymore the guaranteed quality from Finland” (female, b. 1968, Turku). The threat of rupturing the unity and originality of national culture was often located in the discourse as coming from Europe: “Europe must not prevent Estonia from keeping its culture” (female, b. 1988, Tallinn). The discourse also included nationalistic tones which emphasized the current or past national struggles. For example, a respondent from Pécs stressed the importance of representing “[–] the whole Hungary including the Hungarians outside the borders” (female, b. 1985, Pécs), and a respondent from Tallinn highlighted how the ECOC events “[–] remind us how talented and unique the Estonian citizens are, and revoke a feeling from a popular song lyric, according to which ‘It is proud and good to be an Estonian’” (female, b. 1989, Tallinn). The quoted sentence from the patriotic song written at the time of the Singing Revolution refers to the Estonian struggle for independence and nationhood.

Even though the discourse of distinction emphasized the difference between area-based identities, the importance of national culture dominated the views on representation of other area-based identities. Thus, the speakers of the discourse pointed out how the city and the region should bring to the fore national culture and identity, and not to focus (only) on their local and regional cultural particularities: “As Pécs is the only town owning this title, it should represent Hungarian culture” (male, b. 1992, Pécs). In general, the notion of national culture and identity in the discourse of distinction relied on a profoundly traditional understanding of culture with an emphasis on its historical roots. Thus, the national culture was often wished to be represented through “[l]anguage, folk music, folk dance, folk art, folk clothing, and the feeling of belonging together” (female, b. 1988, Pécs), and cultural events implemented by people originating from the particular country. As a respondent stressed: “I think the authors and planners should all be Finnish – thus mainly Finnish program” (female, b. 1954, Turku).

In the discourse of distinction, the emphasis on the uniqueness and particularity of national culture and identity directed the understanding of Europeanness. In the discourse it was rather perceived
as being composed of different national cultures and their differences. Thus, in the discourse the most pleasing way of representing Europeanness was to introduce “different performances of European artists groups, who present the cultural traditions of just their own country” (female, b. 1951, Turku). As a respondent emphasized: “It would be fun to see more differences between different countries” (female, b. 1957, Turku).

Speakers in the discourse of distinction positioned themselves as celebrators, maintainers, bearers, and protectors of identities – local and national identities in particular. For them identities indicated unity and the cohesion of groups. In both discourses the speakers often considered themselves to be those who know what kinds of area-based identities are the best for the people and what their ‘real’ condition is.

In order to investigate the frequency of the discourses in the case cities, the responses, which strongly expressed either of the discourses, were ordered into two categories and quantified. According to the quantification, in Pécs there were more respondents who strongly emphasized the discourse of distinction than the discourse of integration, while in Turku the discourse of integration was stronger. In Tallinn, the relation of discourses was more even; however, the discourse of integration was slightly stronger.

Discussion

The results of the closed questions indicate that national culture was considered in all case cities in a profoundly positive way and as the cultural identity on which the ECOC program should particularly focus. However, answers to the open questions revealed more nuanced and even controversial meanings. On one hand, national culture was defined as involving a positive patriotic ethos and thus having a profoundly important role to play in strengthening the national feeling of belonging and maintaining national cultural particularity. On the other hand, it was considered as referring to certain negative values and qualities, such as a narrow-minded national ethos, which many respondents wanted to overturn. In the latter case, Europeanness was often seen as a positive element which could renew the content of national culture.

The reception of the ECOC events in Pécs and Turku can be interpreted in the context of wider local and national political strivings which are intertwined with the ECOC initiative. The initiative creates political dynamics between candidate cities in the host country. In Hungary and Finland, as in many other European countries, the major cultural life is concentrated in the capital. The competition for the role of the ‘second important city’ is often battled between several cities much smaller in terms of population, cultural infrastructure and cultural budgets. The ECOC designation is a concrete mean to gain credibility in the competition. These dynamics may have an effect on the reception of the ECOC events. Thus, the responses which stressed local culture and the city as a representative of the country and its culture can be interpreted in the contexts of stressing the importance of the city in the national hierarchy of cities. (Lähdesmäki 2011.)

In spite of the slight changes in the focus of the ECOC designation since its establishment, the designation has maintained its strong symbolical value for designated cities, their host countries, and the EU. In fact, the value of the brand seems to have increased during the years, and its meaning has got new connotations when applied to the cities in former socialist countries. The ECOC designation can be interpreted as stepping into a new phase in 2009, when the EU started to implement the policy of designating at least two ECOCs – one of the old member states and one
of the member states that joined the union after 2004 (Decision No 649/2005/EC). In this new phase the discussions on Europe and the European identity have activated in a new way and become one of the major identity political focuses in the policy and promotional rhetoric of the ECOC programs.

Although the integration of the EU has increased in various sectors during the recent decades, the old division of Europe into ‘East’ and ‘West’ has not disappeared after the fall of communism, but continues to influence the notions of Europeanness on various levels (Crudu 2011). The Central and Eastern European countries, which have joined the EU at a later stage, are not always perceived to be as European as their Western counterparts (Lee & Bideleux 2009). Thus, many Central and Eastern European countries share an interest in ‘becoming’ European or being taken as serious members of the EU. The ECOC designation functions as a cultural tool for ‘becoming’ a meaningful European city on a wider European and global scale. However, ‘becoming European’ produces challenges for many smaller Central and Eastern European cities when ‘being European’ is perceived by stressing the condition of infrastructure and modern urban design of the city space, as is often done (Lähdesmäki 2012c).

In the closed questions the respondents valued Europeanness as a positive concept and cultural identity which also was and should be represented in the ECOC events. However, as in the case of national culture, in the open questions the concept also took on more controversial meanings. Some respondents who strongly emphasized the importance of national culture in the ECOC program interpreted Europeanness as a threat to it. In the responses in which Europeanness was more positively viewed, it was often contrasted with the recent history and its impacts on the societal and political climate in the case countries. Particularly in Estonia and Hungary, being a ‘part of Europe’ and its economic, social, and cultural sphere was often discussed in relation to the societal change in the countries.

Various factors may explain the positive attitudes towards Europeanness among most of the respondents. In the case of Pécs and Tallinn, the results can be interpreted in the context of societal and political history of the countries. After the change of the regime in the Eastern European countries, ‘European’ identity was often brought to the fore when the nations aimed to detach themselves from the Soviet system and the image of a socialist state. In this context ‘European’ referred to adapting the legal system, institutions, and economy to the principles of Western countries of the EU. (Kolankiewicz 1993, pp. 106–107.) Similar adapting was needed when Hungary and Estonia joined the EU in 2004. In addition, Estonia joined the eurozone in 2011, which was referred to in several responses on Europeanness in the questionnaire study. On one hand, the strengthened connections to the European polity, increased public discussions on European issues, and the expectations regarding EU memberships may have influenced the reception of the ECOC events in Pécs and Tallinn. On the other hand, the rise of the nationalist movements in the case countries during recent years may have encouraged some respondents to particularly stress the “European dimension” of the ECOC designation as a counter-discourse to the nationalist climate. In the responses from Pécs and Tallinn the European identity was often discussed in relation to the EU and with pride and feeling of importance of being a part of the union. On one hand, Europeanness was seen as something that manifests better living standards and a higher level of quality in various fields. On the other hand, it was also considered to be a bureaucratic force with which a national entity must contend in order to make its significance clear. Besides Pécs and Tallinn, similar kinds of attitudes recurred in the responses in Turku.
The expectations for the national emphasis in the reception of the ECOC events in the case cities contrasted with the main aims of the EU for the ECOC initiative. In general, the national emphasis in the reception of the ECOC events may result from the fact that nation-ness is a profoundly traditional and institutionalized collective identity in nation-states. It is still commonly referred to in diverse discussions on cultural phenomena. In addition, the national emphasis in the responses can be interpreted in the context of the current political climate in Hungary, Estonia and Finland, and more generally in Europe. Nationalist strivings have strengthened in the continent while the EU has faced severe constitutional and economic crises, which have shaken the base of the European integration process in various policy sectors (Calhoun 2009). Debates on nationalism were particularly timely in Hungary during the data collection because of the parliament election in the spring of 2010. The election was preceded by active political campaigns in which right wing parties with their conservative and nationalistic rhetoric received strong media attention. The tension caused by the election and the victory of the right wing parties was also reflected in the reception of the ECOC events in Pécs: political points of view and nationalistic rhetoric were present in several responses to the questionnaire (Lähdesmäki 2011). During the recent years, nationalist movements have influenced the identity political discussions in Finland as well. In Estonia, the national and nationalist discussions have been active since the end of the Soviet occupation.

Conclusions

The study indicated that in Pécs, Tallinn, and Turku the EU’s identity political aims for the ECOC initiative were fulfilled from the point of view of audience reception: the audiences did perceive locality, regionality, and Europeanness in the ECOC events. In particular the perception of Europeanness was relatively high. However, even though the ECOC initiative does not focus on bringing national culture to the fore, it was in Pécs the most and in Tallinn and Turku – after Europeanness – the second most perceived concept of area-based identity in the ECOC events. In all the cities, it was the concept which the audiences considered the events should represent the most. Regionality was less perceived in the events and considered as less important to be brought to the fore. In general, respondents’ notions on Europeanness relied rather on the idea of the ‘Europe of nations’ than the idea of shared Europeanness with common cultural roots or the idea of the ‘Europe of regions’ – the two ideas emphasized in the EU policy rhetoric. The importance of national culture as a source of cultural identification has not weakened despite of the strengthened discourses of shared European culture and identity – a discourse promoted e.g., in the EU’s cultural policy (Shore 2000; 2004, Sassatelli 2002; 2009).

The quantitative analysis of the data indicated how gender, age and education influence the notions and interpretation of the area-based identities in the reception of cultural events. Men and people in their thirties seem to be more critical, skeptical or less interested in the manifestations of area-based identities in cultural events. Less educated people seem more easily to recognize and emphasize the importance of those area-based identities which are ‘close’ to them, such as locality and regionality, while more educated people recognize and value the more abstract identity categories, such as Europeanness. Identification with a certain area-based identity helps interpreting its representations in cultural events.

The qualitative analysis of the open questions on the area-based identity concepts revealed how these concepts are closely linked and determined through interrelations or negations of each other. On one hand, some members of the audience in the case cities emphasized these identities as multilayered and ‘thin’ categories, which are interrelated and integrated in several ways. On the other
hand, some others perceived area-based identities as ‘thick’ and essentialistic categories which were clearly distinguished and should be kept separate. Thus, both the modernist and postmodernist notions of identity were used in making sense of area-based cultural identities.

The results of the study indicate some differences in the audience reception between the designated ECOCs. The differences may arise from the different focuses of cultural programs in the cities: in Turku and Pécs the ECOC program had a clearer regional emphasis than in Tallinn. In addition, the history and position of the host country in the EU, the size of the host country and the city, and the status of the city as a capital or as a regional center may have influenced the notions and interpretations of area-based cultural identities in the ECOC events. In Tallinn, as a capital city of a small country, the regional identity is not particularly strong, while in Pécs and Turku, as regional centers with peculiar cultural identity and cultural history inside the country, the regional identity is more meaningful.

In general, the results of the study indicate that the area-based cultural identities are still profoundly meaningful to people, and international cultural mega-events, such as the ECOC, are expected to represent them both directly in the contents of the events and indirectly in the organization and promotion of them. Area-based cultural identities function as categories through which people structure their cultural perceptions and notions on cultural differences.

References


Bhabha, Homi (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge


