



Reflections on Aspects of the Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on European Capitals of Culture



Edited by Franco Bianchini & Violeta Simjanovska

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**REFLECTIONS ON ASPECTS OF
THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC ON EUROPEAN
CAPITALS OF CULTURE**

REFLECTIONS ON ASPECTS OF THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON
EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE

Including case studies of the three Finnish cities competing for the European Capital of
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This report was developed as part of the programme of activities of the Arts Management Department at Sibelius Academy, UNIARTS in Helsinki, and more specifically, as part of the Academy's international visitor programme. It complements the masters' degree programme in Arts Management, Society and Creative Entrepreneurship, one of whose characteristics is to experts at the highest level in respective fields of knowledge.

The Sibelius Academy's International visitor programme was introduced in 2019. In 2020, Dr Franco Bianchini was awarded a Visiting Professorship at the Arts Management Department. Dr Bianchini is a world-renowned expert on urban cultural policies, culture-led urban regeneration, intercultural urban strategies, as well as on the relationship between cultural policy and sustainable futures.

The main activities that the Arts Management department planned, with Dr Bianchini, in 2020-'21 were focused on lecturing and interaction with student (as part of the "Cultural Planning and Creative Placemaking" course) and on teaching at the Summer Academy in 2020 on "New models of cultural practices, institutions and policies – Arts and well-being". In addition, research activities were planned as an integral part of the masters' degree programme. The aim was to help Arts Management students better understand key phenomena in the field and develop their research skills and professional networks by making contact with important stakeholders in the cultural sector (by interviewing them and/or asking for research materials).

During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a sudden and substantial impact on our lives and in particular on people working in the cultural sector. At the same time, three Finnish cities – Oulu, Savonlinna and Tampere – took part in the competition to be nominated as the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for 2026. After a pre-selection process in 2020, the three cities were shortlisted for the final selection, which led to the designation (in June 2021) of Oulu as 2026 ECoC.

The Arts Management Department, led by Violeta Simajanovska, together with Franco Bianchini, decided to study the effects of the pandemic on ECoCs, with a particular focus on the Finnish competition for the 2026 title. The proposed research activities aimed to generate new knowledge and insights regarding the adaptability and resilience of a selection of ECoCs and of the three Finnish candidates for the 2026 ECoC title in the face of the pandemic and to contribute to the discussion in this field. The 10 selected ECoC case studies are Turku 2011 (the Finnish ECoC before Oulu 2026), Aarhus 2017, Leeuwarden 2018, Matera 2019, Galway 2020, Rijeka 2020, Novi Sad 2022, Kaunas 2022, Eleusis 2023 and Tartu 2024.

In particular, the research planned to look closely at several important topics such as the effects of the pandemic on the potential to achieve 'cultural democracy' at the city level; the development of the 'well-being' agenda within ECoC programmes; cultural interventions related to social exclusion; cultural activities aimed at contributing to address some of the mental health problems produced by the pandemic, and the role of the ECoC in the debate about a city's future during and after the pandemic.

The research took place from December 2020–June 2021. All of the activities were organised remotely, mentored by Dr Bianchini and supported by Dr Violeta Simjanovska, head of the Arts Management Department. Five students from the Arts Management programme were actively involved in this research project: Elizaveta (Lisa) Bomash, Miia Kivilä, Paola Nieto Paredes, Jenni Pekkarinen and Valtteri Pokela. Sets of conclusions, recommendations and questions for further research (both related specifically to the 13 case study cities and aimed at ECoCs in general) form an integral part of this report. We hope that readers will be interested in the report’s rich and complex reconstructions of events and analyses. Despite the study’s limitations (highlighted in the report itself), we believe that this work is a valuable step in furthering understanding of an important but under-researched topic.

Methodology

The methodology used in the research was proposed by Dr Bianchini and were discussed and adopted together with Dr. Simjanovska. The students/contributors involved – Elizaveta (Lisa) Bomash, Miia Kivilä, Paola Nieto Paredes, Jenni Pekkarinen and Valtteri Pokela – were responsible for the collection and analysis of the data.

Data collection includes desk research (the analysis of published documents and internet sources, including bid books and other material produced by ECoC teams) and semi-structured interviews with ECoC team members and experts.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online (on Zoom) and were primarily focused on the impacts of the pandemic (and responses to it) on the legacy plans of Turku (ECoC 2011), Aarhus 2017, Leeuwarden 2018 and Matera 2019. In the cases of Rijeka 2020–’21 and Galway 2020–’21, the analysis focused on the impacts of the pandemic on the delivery of the ECoC, as well as on legacy plans. In the cases of Novi Sad 2022, Kaunas 2022, Eleusis 2023, Tartu 2024, and the three Finnish candidates for 2026, the focus of the analysis was how the pandemic affected the planning of the ECoC.

Data analysis employs a combination of approaches to qualitative case study and comparative research. Comparisons are made between three ECoCs which took place before the outbreak of the pandemic (Aarhus 2017, Leeuwarden 2018 and Matera 2019), as well as between Galway 2020–’21 and Rijeka 2020–’21, the two ECoCs, in Ireland and Croatia respectively, whose operation was most directly disrupted by the pandemic. The comparative analysis makes specific reference to (among other issues) reductions in staffing, revisions of the cultural programmes, digital delivery, the role of volunteers and legacy planning. The comparative method is also used to discuss: a) the effects of the pandemic on the plans of Kaunas 2022, Novi Sad 2022, Eleusis 2023 and Tartu 2024; b) the cases of the three Finnish cities bidding for the 2026 ECoC title: Oulu, Tampere and Savonlinna. The focus of the analysis for the three Finnish case studies included: internal working patterns, building of partnerships and other collaborative relationships in cultural programming, the planning of participatory activities, volunteering, the digitalisation of the cultural offer, and the roles of the ECoC and local cultural policies in wider urban regeneration strategies.

An indicative list of research topics was identified as part of the methodology. These topics were related mainly to emerging opportunities and issues for the ECoCs involved. They ranged from questions concerning teamwork and internal working patterns, collaboration and partnerships, and cultural programmes, to participatory activities and engage-

ment, volunteer programmes, digitalisation, cultural well-being, cultural strategies and culture-led urban regeneration, political support, relationships with national and European authorities, tourism impacts, and future challenges.

Research limitations

The team faced considerable challenges in terms of organising all planned activities included in the research methodology. The perspectives of some ECoCs (for example, Leeuwarden 2018) were not fully included, because unfortunately it was not possible to interview ECoC representatives. Secondly, as the legacies of ECoCs are often created by diverse players and usually not by one single legacy body, it would be useful to collect further data from a broader range of stakeholders, even though the possibility of discovering contradictory or different experiences may be higher.

Executive summary

The report considers key aspects of the impacts of the pandemic in 2020–‘21 on the plans of Oulu, Savonlinna and Tampere to become the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for 2026. Such plans are examined in the wider context of a discussion of the pandemic’s effects on a selection of ten previous and future ECoCs, located in different parts of Europe, from the Aegean Sea to Scandinavia. Because of the report’s focus on the three Finnish candidates for the 2026 ECoC title (awarded to Oulu in June 2021), the first chapter discusses how the COVID-19 crisis impacted the legacies of Turku 2011, Finland’s previous ECoC. The chapter pays particular attention to legacy strategies concerning public space, the creative industries, and the contributions of cultural activities to well-being.

Chapter Two provides a comparative discussion of the salient features of how COVID impacted on the legacy plans of three ECoCs whose delivery was completed in the years before the outbreak of the pandemic: Aarhus (Denmark’s second largest city) in 2017, Leeuwarden (the capital of Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands) in 2018 and Matera (in Basilicata, Southern Italy) in 2019. The discussion in this and other chapters attempts to identify not only problems and issues raised by the impacts of COVID-19, but also opportunities, related, for example, to the potential for wider cultural participation afforded by the strengthening of ECoCs’ digital cultural offer, as well as for artistic projects inspired by issues raised by the pandemic itself. Common themes emerging in this and subsequent chapters include the problematic effects of the crisis for the sustainability of local cultural sectors and tourism economies, as well as for the continuation of international artistic collaboration projects.

Chapter Three examines the cases of Galway 2020 and Rijeka 2020, the two ECoCs, in Ireland and Croatia respectively, whose operation was most directly disrupted by the pandemic. The comparative analysis makes specific reference to (among other issues) reductions in staffing, revisions of the cultural programmes, digital delivery, the role of volunteers and legacy planning. The discussion reveals similarities (for example, concerning the need to improve communication with the European Union) but also important differences in how the two ECoC teams responded to extremely challenging circumstances, for instance in relation to the shift to a digital offer, which was a strategic choice – embedded in cultural programming – in Galway but not in Rijeka.

Chapter Four concentrates on future ECOCs: Novi Sad in Serbia and Kaunas in Lithuania (who will share the title for 2022 with Esch-sur-Alzette, in Luxembourg), the Greek ancient city of Eleusis (part of the Attica region) for 2023 and the historic city of Tartu in Estonia for 2024. The chapter considers key aspects of how the pandemic has affected the processes of ECoC planning, in areas including the following: finance, relationships with stakeholders, international cultural co-operation, digitalisation, the roles of cultural activities in economic regeneration, culture and well-being, and volunteer programmes.

The focus of Chapter Five is on Oulu and its two Finnish competitors: Tampere and Savonlinna. The chapter critically examines a selection of aspects of the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the three Finnish ECoC bids. These aspects range from the three teams' internal working patterns and their building of partnerships and other collaborative relationships for cultural programming, the planning of participatory activities, volunteering, the digitalisation of the cultural offer, and the roles of the ECoC and cultural policies in wider urban regeneration strategies.

Chapter Six offers brief concluding reflections on a selection of the report's main findings, also by placing this report in the wider context of existing studies on the effects of the pandemic for Europe's cultural and creative economy, with particular reference to the impacts of the crisis on European cities and to policy responses.

Primary findings

This report highlights the strong political support enjoyed by Finnish ECoC candidates during the pandemic. There was also increased recognition of the importance of culture by the municipality in the case of Aarhus; however, this did not translate into increased cultural funding. In some cases (Novi Sad, for example) volunteer programmes had an active role in delivering medicine and food to vulnerable people during the pandemic. However, even in the countries where there was political support, the practical needs of the cultural sector were often overlooked, due to the insufficient inclusion of representatives from the sector in decision-making about the management of the pandemic.

The case studies highlight the importance of providing financial support for the independent cultural sector (including individual artists and other freelancers), which was hit particularly severely by the pandemic and is a vital component of the cultural ecologies of European cities.

The performing arts were generally affected by the pandemic more adversely than other cultural forms, and this should be recognised by support strategies.

The increased costs of delivery of cultural events in conditions of COVID-19 safety were more problematic for smaller cultural organisations.

There was a shift in most case study cities towards local, regional and national tourism. Drops in visitor numbers were more serious in cities like Matera and Tampere, which had achieved significant numbers of international visitors before the pandemic. On the other hand, some cities located in areas of natural beauty, like Savonlinna, benefitted from an increase in domestic visitors.

With regard to digitalisation, the strategies adopted by different cities varied considerably. The considerable acceleration of the trend of digitalisation, brought about by the pandemic, offered opportunities for environmental sustainability, greater accessibility by

the public, reaching new audiences, strengthening of regional collaborations, cost and time savings, and for cultural experimentation by artists and cultural organisations (as in the case of Novi Sad). Digital communication made it easier and cheaper for ECoC teams to maintain networks of international collaboration, but it was often impossible to organise international artistic exchanges, fully understand artistic projects (without being able to visit them) and build artists' peer networks. The report also highlights the need for a richer, more complex and 'humanised' digital cultural offer, as well as the risks of digital saturation and fatigue, which in the long run could reduce the public's interest in cultural activities. There are also continuing problems of digital exclusion, noted, for example, in relation to older people in rural areas in Pirkanmaa, near Tampere. However, the report observes that such events in some cases pose greater organisational challenges than large live events – due to their small scale, number and technological requirements.

Cultural participation was probably the area of work which was most negatively affected by the pandemic. It was in many cases impossible to deliver participatory cultural projects involving children and older people.

Arts and health/well-being projects and policies grew in visibility and importance, partly because of the need to deal with the mental health crisis, which was exacerbated by the pandemic.

For ECoC teams, the pandemic highlighted the importance of ensuring 'foolproof planning' and greater built-in resilience (something which Oulu 2026 is prioritising). Many ECoC teams demonstrated considerable flexibility and adaptability.

The COVID-19 crisis certainly acted in many cases (in Aarhus, Leeuwarden and Matera, for example) as a stimulus for ECoC teams and city policy makers to take stock and discuss alternative scenarios for the future of their cities. It also produced important project innovations, including, for example, the focus on emotional health and the 'Emotional reflector' idea in Kaunas. Some ECoCs detected an interesting change in monitoring and evaluation imperatives, in a policy climate which, due to the disruptive influence of the pandemic, was in some cases more open-minded. There was perhaps less pressure to achieve measurable targets, and more attention paid to the qualitative aspects of projects. As one interviewee from Kaunas 2022 observed, audience target numbers (being outside anyone's control) became less important, while the priority became to create something special.

Important questions remain about the likely behaviour of audiences after the pandemic. Will safety considerations continue to discourage particularly older people from attending and/or participating? Will people be reluctant to pay for cultural activities, partly as a result of the massively increased provision of free cultural content during the pandemic?

It is as yet also unclear whether public funding and business sponsorship for ECoC projects would decline if there wasn't a significant recovery of urban retail, cultural tourism and night-time economies. Lastly, more research is needed about the perspectives of citizens, artists and other independent cultural professionals about how the pandemic has affected the ECoC.

CHAPTER 1: Turku 2011

1.1 Context

Turku, founded in 1229, is a city in the southwest of the country, an important cultural centre, and the oldest city in Finland. It was also the first capital of Finland – serving as an important gateway to the west. Turku, on the river Aura, is a significant commercial port that has a high level of passenger traffic to Åland and Sweden. Today, it has about 200,000 inhabitants which makes it the fifth biggest city in Finland.

In 2004, Turku City Council decided to apply for the 2011 ECoC title. The team produced the bid book *Turku on Fire* and set up the Turku 2011 Foundation. In 2008, the foundation began to build its network of partners for the ECoC year: the cities of Naantali, Raisio, Salo and Pori in the Turku region were eager to contribute, as were many major art and culture institutions across all of Finland – operating in fields ranging from visual arts, design, architecture and literature to music, theatre, circus, and performance. The Turku ECoC year was also marketed internationally and there was co-operation with Tallinn ECoC 2011 (Saukkolin 2012, 6–8).

One aspect which made Turku 2011 distinctive compared to previous ECoCs was that scientific research was given a significant role throughout the ECoC process from the bidding stage to the implementation, evaluation and legacy phases (Sevón, 2012, 6).

Turku 2011 included a total of 167 projects and over 8,000 events, which generated about 2.2 million programme visits (Saukkolin et al., 2012, 47 and 34).

The main aim of this chapter is to explore how the pandemic impacted the legacy plans of Turku 2011. Information for the purpose of the study has been gathered from reports, news articles and online sources. Additionally, people from the Turku ECoC team and the City Council were interviewed to get a better understanding of how the pandemic has affected their work and Turku's cultural life. We interviewed Cultural Secretary Nina Niemi-Nagy, Cultural Well-being Co-ordinator Irina Niemimäki and Programme Co-ordinator Heli Lempa (all three from the Cultural Department of Turku City Council), as well as Jussi Fredriksson, Jazz City Turku's director and a professional jazz musician.

1.2 Outcomes, impacts and criticisms of Turku ECoC 2011

There is evidence that Turku ECoC 2011 enhanced its citizens' well-being and cultural participation, as well as co-operation within the local cultural sector. The ECoC year also increased employment, tourism and consumption of culture in Turku and Southwest Finland and strengthened Turku's image as a culture and events city (Saukkolin, 2012, 34–44). Niemi-Nagy (interview, 2021) attributes one change in Turku's citizens' way of life to the effects of the ECoC: people spend more time in the city centre and use restaurant and cultural services more than before the ECoC.

Jazz concert producer Flame Jazz is an example of the far-reaching results of Turku 2011 for the local cultural sector. The founder and managing director of Flame Jazz, Jussi Fredriksson (interview, 2021), says that the whole idea – and indeed the name – of Flame

Jazz came from Turku's ECoC application process. Flame Jazz evolved from a series of jazz concerts into Jazz City Turku, an association that includes the Turku Jazz Festival, the Turku Jazz Orchestra, Turku Sea Jazz and Flame Jazz Records. Flame Jazz's development, however, has not been straightforward. The organisation's financial support from the Turku City Council was cut dramatically right after the ECoC in 2011 and everything needed to be rebuilt from scratch (Fredriksson, 2021). Heli Lempa (interview, 2021) also thinks that the Turku ECoC as a whole would have had better results if its financial structure had been planned in a more sustainable manner.

Turku 2011 was a success in many ways, but there is always a place for alternative viewpoints and experiences. In fact, critical voices started appearing when Turku won the ECoC title, since the city had already reduced funding for local cultural organisations. These cuts meant, for example, closing down two public libraries and a building that housed workspaces for local artists (Lähdesmäki, 2013, 604–605). The criticisms of Turku's cultural policy making and of the 2011 ECoC also gave rise also to the "Turku – European Capital of Subculture" programme. It was an activist counter-discourse, counterposed to the city's official ECoC programme. It praised marginal, grassroots-level cultural activities as an alternative to the "high culture" offered by Turku 2011 (Lähdesmäki, 2013).

1.3 Continuation work and legacy

Turku 2011 has been widely considered a success, and several positive outcomes have been identified. In a strategic consultancy review carried out by Neil Peterson and Hanns Dietrich Schmidt (2020), the authors recognise both intangible and tangible legacies. In terms of intangible legacies, they note that many people they interviewed had noticed a change in atmosphere and spirit, increased openness and the emergence of a more outward-looking attitude in the city. Turku's citizens managed to reconnect with some of their main urban landscape assets, especially the banks of the River Aura, which became a lively cultural area with an acclaimed restaurant scene.

In terms of tangible legacies, Peterson and Schmidt mention Logomo, a cultural centre that combines culture and the creative economy. They consider Logomo to be an impressive example of how to repurpose a building – Logomo used to be a locomotive workshop. Events and festivals started during the ECoC year are also seen by Peterson and Schmidt to have a lot of potential to build on (2020, pp. 5–6).

In late 2011, the Turku 2011 Working Group for Continuation, established by the Turku 2011 Foundation, outlined three themes for continuing the work started during the ECoC year: art and city space; business life and creative industries, and well-being and participation. The Working Group further noted that culture should be considered a strategic focus point for Turku policy makers (Saukkolin et al., 2012, p. 45).

Peterson and Schmidt (2020) suggest that arts and well-being could be a potential area of specialization area for Turku. Indeed, cultural well-being was one of the key objectives of Turku 2011 and it was approached mainly by using cultural activities to attempt to develop its citizens' sense of community. A related aim was that by 2016, Southern Finland would be profiled as a region of cultural well-being, with co-ordinated work at the regional level. Another goal was to raise awareness of the importance of culture for the development of the city and for the well-being of individuals and communities. Approximately one-third of

Turku's ECoC projects addressed aspects of culture and well-being in one way or another (Saukkolin et al. 2012, 9; Turku 2011 Foundation, 2011, 5–7).

However, the final ECoC report by the Turku 2011 Foundation (2012) about the implementation of the Capital of Culture year does not really evaluate the success and impact of the cultural well-being initiatives. Furthermore, according to Peterson and Schmidt (2020, 6), the outcomes of the projects and their impact on physical and mental well-being remain quite unclear.

1.4 COVID-19 in Turku and some of its economic effects

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Finland in March 2020. Shutdowns, cancelled events, closing of schools, remote working and studying and a lot of uncertainty followed. The Turku policy makers still continued to develop plans for 2021 – the 10th anniversary of their ECoC year. Turku's unemployment increased by 3.7% during the first pandemic year, reaching 12.7 % in August 2020. Unemployment also increased within Turku's cultural sector, mostly among freelancers (Fredriksson, 2021 and Niemi-Nagy, interviews, 2021).

Thanks to the COVID-19-related financial support from the state, the city of Turku had a surplus of €10.2 million after financial year 2020. The tourism sector in Turku was significantly impacted by the pandemic. The number of overnight stays, for example, decreased by over 400,000 from 2019 to 2020 (Visit Finland, 2021).

1.5 The 10th anniversary of the ECoC in the midst of COVID-19

2021 marked the 10th anniversary of Turku's ECoC year. Peterson and Schmidt (2020) explore how the year 2021 could serve as a celebration of, and a reflection about, the ECoC year and as an important milestone on the way to 2029, when Turku will celebrate its 800th anniversary. The report by Peterson and Schmidt was published in May 2020, during the early stages of the pandemic. The fieldwork and analysis, however, were conducted before the pandemic hit, and therefore the authors did not consider the wider impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in their analysis of the ECoC legacies for Turku.

The two authors recommend placing more strategic emphasis on making Turku an internationally recognised leader in developing socially engaged best practices for cultural activities; developing and creating capacity-building opportunities for Turku's independent cultural sector; further developing the link between culture and well-being in local cultural strategies, and working on neighbourhood cultural development (Peterson and Schmidt, 2020).

As the pandemic continues, these recommendations are still valid – probably even more so than before. Their implementation, however, has been challenging. As a consequence of the pandemic, the cultural sector is in a deep operational and financial crisis. Legacy building and preparing for the city's 800th anniversary are certainly not easy tasks under the current circumstances.

1.6 Emerging issues and opportunities

This section of the chapter will explore some of the impacts of the pandemic on the continuation and legacy work of Turku 2011. The analysis will be based on the three continu-

ation activity themes outlined by the Turku 2011 Working Group for Continuation (WGC): art and city space; business life and creative industries, and well-being and participation. The issues and opportunities brought about by the pandemic in these three areas will be discussed. The impact of COVID-19 on some of the recommendations by Peterson and Schmidt (2020) will be discussed in relation to the three themes.

1.6.1 Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on legacy plans: art and city space

With regard to the art and city space theme, the WGC highlighted several aspects that would strengthen the arts sector and revitalise the city's public spaces. They emphasised the importance of networking opportunities for arts and cultural professionals; supporting the role of artistic subjects in the activities of schools; organising cultural events in public spaces; opening new urban spaces for culture both for Turku residents and for tourists; and regenerating urban spaces through cultural activities (Turku 2011 *Jatkotyöryhmä*, 2012).

Many of these aims have been put at risk by the pandemic. Networking has been difficult, as travelling and face-to-face meetings have been restricted and digital opportunities cannot always provide answers to artists' networking needs. Educational institutions have moved to online teaching and at school music and performing arts activities have been difficult to organise. Cultural events have largely been cancelled and international tourism has dramatically decreased.

Peterson and Schmidt (2020) recommend several courses of action for Turku related to art and city space. First of all, they highlight the importance of recreation and re-connection. They note the important role of cultural activities in a world where people look for re-connection after COVID-19. They also recommend creating greater synergies between culture, sport and youth services in Turku.

The COVID-19 pandemic has directly affected both national and especially international partnerships, as travelling and face-to-face meetings with partners have been impossible. The Cultural Department of the Turku City Council noted that international relations were difficult to maintain during the pandemic, even though digital tools enabled communication and meetings online. Some projects were postponed, including one planned for the 10th anniversary of Turku as the 2011 ECoC, which was supposed to connect different ECoC cities to Turku. In addition, the 10th anniversary celebrations now focus on domestic instead of international tourists (Niemi-Nagy and Lempa, personal communication, 15.4.2021).

Another recommendation by Peterson and Schmidt (2020) was that Turku should develop specific ideas for neighbourhood cultural development. They note that evidence suggests that many people prefer to enjoy cultural life in their own neighbourhoods. They add that many plans target developments in and around the city centre and suggest that Turku could launch a "District of Culture" programme in 2021.

Peterson and Schmidt (2020) suggest that attention should be paid to the development and capacity building of Turku's independent cultural sector. This, according to the authors, includes growing successful organisations, sharing best practices, contributing to the delivery of key city agendas – related to, for example, social impact, and enabling meaningful international connections and funding. Even though Peterson and Schmidt's research was largely conducted before the pandemic, this suggestion is even more relevant now in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. All over Europe, the independent cultural sector

has been hit hard by the pandemic, and its rebuilding should now be a priority for most European cities.

*1.6.2 Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on legacy plans:
the creative industries*

The report by the WGC highlights the important role of culture for the economy and business, emphasising the potential of the creative economy and recognising the need to support and the creation opportunities for the cultural and creative sectors. The report calls for interdisciplinary approaches, developing new investment and sponsoring models, and further developing the education and training of creative professionals (Turku 2011 Jatkotyöryhmä, 2012).

Cultural sector freelancers in Finland and the rest of Europe struggle with layoffs, unemployment, uncertainty about the future, and looming bankruptcies. If Turku was to follow the advice of the WGC, this would be a vital time to develop new support systems, especially for the independent cultural sector. Fredriksson (personal communication, 30.3.2021) also notes that cultural freelancers and entrepreneurs are experiencing financial hardship through lack of support. He predicts that the devastating situation of cultural freelancers and entrepreneurs may lead to bankruptcies and mental health issues. On the other hand, Fredriksson mentioned that communication within the cultural sector has improved.

Peterson and Schmidt (2020) also suggest that Turku should use the 10th ECoC anniversary year in 2021 and the preparations for the 800th anniversary to provide some consideration to the city's image. They point out that Turku has several different marketing messages and slogans and recommend a more integrated approach.

It seems clear that, especially in the context of the pandemic and in the post-pandemic, Turku, maintaining and further developing the city's image as a cultural city requires some continuing work and reconsideration. The pandemic makes it ever more pressing for all cities that identify as cultural cities to reconsider their image, which cannot only mean superficial slogans and marketing materials but in essence strengthening their cultural identity by supporting and developing the independent cultural sector, improving working conditions for artists and participation opportunities for the public.

*1.6.3 Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on legacy plans:
well-being and cultural participation*

Cultural well-being was an essential part of the ECoC programme of Turku. The WGC suggested that Turku should continue working on developing the relationship between culture and well-being regionally, nationally and internationally. The operational work should be supported by research. The work should be citizen-led, it should enhance accessibility and participation and it should aim at creating long-lasting practices and models. The report highlights the importance of recognising different age and demographic groups, as well as groups and individuals with special needs (Turku 2011 Jatkotyöryhmä, 2012).

As a consequence of the pandemic, questions of cultural well-being are – if possible – even more relevant and important than before. Now, on their 10th ECoC anniversary, Turku's policymakers have an important opportunity to revive the work begun 10 years

ago. Problems of mental health and loneliness in particular increased as a result of the pandemic and related restrictions on social life.

Peterson and Schmidt (2020) suggest that Turku should aspire to become an international leader in the development of “socially engaged best practice” in the use of culture. Culture is increasingly seen to have an important role in effecting positive social change. The two authors note that the common focus areas of Turku’s Recreation Division – promoting equality and reducing inequality; promoting participation, activity and multidisciplinary co-operation; and strengthening partnership with the third sector – are all in line with Finnish national policy aims, as well as with European best practice. In addition, several ECoC programmes, Turku included, have developed new ways to connect culture with positive social and community developments. The report also found that the biggest community challenges identified by the Welfare Division of Turku were the loneliness and isolation of the ageing population, both of which increase mental health issues and social exclusion. Peterson and Schmidt (2020) believe that Turku could have the potential to lead the way to socially engaged best practice in culture by developing clear and measurable strategies to address such issues. The authors highlight that the work should be done in collaboration with European partners.

Participation in cultural activities by the citizens of Turku increased during the ECoC year in 2011. The volunteer programme had an important role in enhancing participation. During the pandemic, cultural participation decreased because of the restrictions, but it will likely return to pre-pandemic levels (Lempa and Niemimäki, personal communication, 15.4.2021).

CHAPTER 2: Aarhus 2017, Leeuwarden 2018 and Matera 2019

2.1 Context

Aarhus 2017 in Denmark, Leeuwarden 2018 in the Netherlands, and Matera 2019 in Italy were “lucky”, as the majority of interviewees commented, to be the latest ECoCs that were able to execute their programmes under “normal” planning conditions before the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020. However, this lucky situation did not avoid the effects of the pandemic on the legacies of these ECoCs.

Legacy strategies have become crucial sustainability requirements of ECoC programmes. Instead of an isolated one-year event, the title rather constitutes a platform to strengthen the cultural policies of the host city, thereby ensuring the long-term continuation of the achievements and impacts of the programme (Garcia and Cox, 2013, pp. 111 and 206). However, as one interviewee (personal communication, 2021) observes, the planning and execution of legacy plans has always been a challenge for ECoCs, even without COVID-19. The outbreak of the pandemic has made this task considerably more difficult.

This chapter explores the key results and aspects of the three ECoCs and their programmes; the proposed legacy plans and the challenges that existed before the pandemic, and the actual implications of the pandemic on the continuation of key impacts, as well as on the planning and implementation of the legacies.

The desk research for this chapter included the analysis of ECoC bids, legacy documents and programmes, and of evaluation reports. Finally, interviews with key players from the three ECoCs were conducted in order to acquire additional insights and information.

This section of the report does have some important limitations. First, the perspectives of Leeuwarden 2018 were not fully included, because unfortunately it was not possible to interview a representative of Leeuwarden 2018. Secondly, as the legacy of Aarhus is created by diverse players and not by one legacy body, it would be useful to collect further data from a range of stakeholders, even though the possibility of contradictory or different experiences may be higher.

2.2 Aarhus 2017

2.2.1 Context, concept, programme and key results

Aarhus is a city with a population of about 300,000, making it the second largest city in Denmark after Copenhagen. It is considered to be the main economic and cultural centre of the Central Denmark Region (CDR) which is composed of 19 municipalities and has 1.3 million inhabitants (Nielsen et al., 2018). Denmark’s largest university is located in Aarhus. Even before the ECoC year, the city possessed a strong cultural infrastructure (Aarhus 2017 Foundation, 2012). Given this, the ECoC had a significant focus on building “soft”

infrastructure to support the strategic development plans of the region's cultural sector: networks, collaboration, and capacity building were crucial elements of the programmes and projects presented, together with new ways of using the already existing cultural infrastructure (Aarhus 2017 Foundation, 2012). In addition to being integrated into cultural strategies, the ECoC was part of regional economic development and tourism plans.

The question “is Aarhus a large provincial city or is it a small metropolis?” (Aarhus 2017 Foundation, 2012, p. 6) was central to Aarhus's candidature for the 2017 ECoC. The aim of the ECoC proposal was for Aarhus to gain recognition and redefine itself as a European metropolitan city, instead of merely a Danish city (European Commission, 2012a).

“Let's Rethink” was the theme that encompassed themes such as rethinking the city, its arts and creativity, and its values. According to the *Ex-post Evaluation Report* (European Commission, 2018), this theme was helpful for “reflection and asking questions, as much as it was about trying to articulate a new narrative or create a better image for the city.” (p.50)

According to the evaluation carried out by the rethinkIMPACTS 2017 team at the University of Aarhus (Degn et al., 2018) the key aspects of Aarhus 2017 included:

- strong regional support and cross-municipal collaboration, as 19 municipalities were involved in the ECoC. Contrary to other ECoCs, regional collaboration was developed right from the bidding stage and not after winning the title.
- The majority of interdisciplinary, cross-institutional and cross-sectoral projects (constituting 91% of the cultural programme).
- Delivery of a high-quality cultural programme which contributed to “the long-term development and significance of culture” (Degn et al., 2018, p.146) in the city. However, generally only the large cultural players benefited, whereas new audiences were not systematically reached.
- International tourists were a small proportion of the audience. Increases in tourism cannot be easily attributed to the ECoC, since the audience was mostly local and regional.
- Culture gained a more significant role in the regional political agenda. However, cultural expenditure was not increased (Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019).
- Aarhus 2017 was acknowledged as a “successful, stable and well-run European Capital of Culture project” (Degn et al., 2018, p. 147).
- A successful volunteer programme involving 4,500 people, with legacy effects for tourism programmes.

2.2.2 ECoC legacy and pre-COVID-19 challenges

According to the bid book, the Aarhus 2017 Foundation reserved €3.5 million for continuing projects after the year of culture. The planning of the legacy was done before the implementation of the ECoC and involved the consultation of 100 stakeholders (European Commission, 2018), a process that resulted in the publication of the document *Our Legacy: A New Beginning* in March 2017. In this report, Valeur Simonsen (2017) identifies the ECoC's legacies in the following four areas:

1. Political and organisational

- Enhanced political co-operation, a broader concept of culture and policy change
- Competency development across the region

- Strengthened international engagement
- Good governance, best practice business planning and responsible financial management
- Systematic documentation and new evaluation methods

2. Programme legacy

- Competency development in projects and institutions
- Permanent art installations and continuation of projects
- Enhanced co-operation and new partnerships at the regional, national and international level
- Testing of new business models
- Positive social impact through citizens' engagement
- Strategic approaches to major events
- Legacy of memory

3. Communications:

- Strengthened international visibility and profile for Aarhus and its region
- Broad social engagement in cultural events, including the volunteer programme
- New audiences for cultural events
- Cultural tourism strategy and tourism tools
- New communications networks and partnerships

4. Development:

- New fundraising models
- Enhanced co-operation between culture and business
- Positive attitude towards sponsoring large cultural events in the future
- Continuing funding for projects from international sources as well.

The document presents, in a very positive manner, the possible impacts of the ECoC and is not a legacy plan (European Commission, 2018). Similarly, Degn et al. comment that the legacy document “outlined the expected effects, but did not have a forward-looking, action-oriented perspective.” (2018, p.153)

According to the European Commission (2018) and Valeur Simonsen (2017), five projects were selected for continuation. Nevertheless, only the last two of the following list were active after the ECoC year:

- Children's International Festival, Aarhus 39 in co-operation with the Hay Festival.
- Architecture Biennial of the Aarhus Festival.
- Aarhus Walks on Water Fashion Show, which continued for a second edition in 2018.
- ARoS Triennial by the ARoS Museum. The continuation edition was planned for 2020 with the support of the Aarhus municipality. According to a press release by the museum in October 2019 (ARoS, 2019), the triennial was cancelled due to lack of funding. In spite of that, the museum curated an exhibition based on the theme that had been chosen for the 2020 Triennial.
- The Re-thinkers volunteer programme, which was continued for tourism purposes, with volunteers working as cruise ship hosts under the VisitAarhus brand.

In addition to the five aforementioned projects, other tangible outcomes of Aarhus 2017 demonstrate long-term legacy capacity. These are:

- strategies and new models. Aarhus 2017 developed a Strategic Business Plan, which was acknowledged as an example of good practice and as a tool for future ECoCs in order to ensure effective implementation. Additionally, Aarhus 2017 created the Aarhus Sustainability Model (ASM) that was adopted by Leeuwarden 2018 and Matera 2019, and which could be used as well by future ECoCs and the cultural sector. Both are examples of good governance and responsible financial management for large cultural events and can therefore be viewed as legacies.
- Different types of collaboration. The cross-municipal, regional collaboration model adopted by Aarhus 2017 continued for the European Region of Culture 2018–2019 project, as did cross-sectoral collaboration that involved the arts and business. For example, the Visit Aarhus programme now covers a major part of the region, rather than just the city, and has developed the concept of one destination that combines city and country. “That has very much been a legacy of Aarhus 2017, to see that the municipalities are stronger when they collaborate” (Ejgod Hansen, 2021).
- Expertise in impact research. RethinkIMPACTS 2017 was established in collaboration between Aarhus University, the municipality, and the CDR, as a space for research and evaluation of the management of large cultural projects, particularly the ECoC. It produced a main evaluation report, as well as multiple thematic reports, theses and conferences on topics such as audiences for cultural programmes, the participation of cultural institutions and businesses in the ECoC, political components, media, tourism, organisational and governance aspects, volunteering and citizen participation. Currently, the activities of rethinkIMPACTS 2017 are continued in the Centre for Cultural Evaluation (CCE).

Finally, the City of Aarhus is developing a project for 2022 called “Music City Aarhus”, which, according to one interviewee (personal communication, 2021), intends to fill the city with music for one entire year as a celebration of the strong local musical heritage. This project was born in 2018 after the impetus generated by the ECoC year. At first, it was not part of a legacy plan as it was initiated by the music sector in the city; however, the City of Aarhus has now integrated the project into its planning and is partially funding it.

The foundation in charge of the implementation of the ECoC did not consider itself responsible for the legacy strategy and ceased operations in October 2018 (Degn et al., 2018). As no legacy body was set up, the responsibility for legacy planning and implementation was passed to the municipalities, the Central Denmark Region and other stakeholders involved in the ECoC. As a result, legacies have been created independently by each key actor.

According to Ejgod Hansen (2020), “it has been a very dispersed network-based method of creating a legacy without any co-ordination, which also means that the strategic thinking about how we can use this in a longer perspective has not been done.” This has also meant that relatively little impact and public visibility for the public has been achieved so far.

One interviewee (personal communication, 2021), however, suggests that despite the lack of a co-ordinated strategy, the legacy of Aarhus 2017 can be seen in the cultural sector – for example, in regional collaboration arrangements, in the development of the VisitAarhus brand, and in the cultural policy plans of the CDR and of the City of Aarhus.

One interviewee (personal communication, 2021) additionally identifies an external factor as a possible challenge for legacy strategies: changes on the political level. There is a fear that, due to political change, the importance of culture and the accomplishments of the ECoC may be forgotten or dismissed by those who were not part of the ECoC or do not share pride in its achievements. There is a persistent need to remember and renew the successes of Aarhus 2017. The pandemic, as shown later in this chapter, increases this need.

2.3 Leeuwarden 2018

2.3.1 Context, concept, programme and key results

Leeuwarden is a city of 120,000 people and is the capital of the Friesland province in the north of the Netherlands, which is home to 650,000 inhabitants. According to the bid book (Lwd2018 Foundation, 2013, p.3), despite its long and rich history, the region where the city of Leeuwarden is situated is one of the poorest areas in the Netherlands. The principal driver for the ECoC title was the need to transform Leeuwarden into a more vibrant and creative city in order to counteract challenges such as the flight of the young population, the loss of biodiversity and relatively low numbers of visitors.

Similarly to Aarhus 2017, this ECoC adopted a regional approach where city and countryside were closely linked. Questions such as “how will it become more attractive for young people to live in rural areas...despite the attraction of the metropolises” (Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019, p. 159) exemplify the ECoC’s need to reflect particularly on the agricultural character and needs of the rural Friesland region, and to redefine its relationship with the urban region.

The different municipalities of the Friesland region collaborated with the Leeuwarden local authority on the ECoC project. The project also had a strong transnational dimension where the Waddenland region (the sea coast that extends from Denmark to Sweden) and the Frisian community around the world were also involved.

The concept of the ECoC’s programme, focused on the Friesland words *Iepen Mienskip* (“open sense of community”), was rooted in regional culture and values. It refers to a traditional sense of community thinking that challenged the “centralised organisational mode of society” (Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019, p.270). Simultaneously, this community thinking was renewed in order to embrace influences from all over Europe (Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019, p.270), and thus to include a European dimension. This openness resulted as well in the inclusion of major strategic issues from Friesland and the rest of Europe, “such as the integration of ethnic minorities, the need to further promote cultural and environmental sustainability, and a re-evaluation of the relationship between city and countryside.” (European Commission, 2012b, p.9)

Other key aspects of Leeuwarden 2018 were:

- a community and bottom-up approach. Following the *Iepen Mienskip* concept, almost 90% of the cultural programme consisted of projects designed and delivered by the local people (European Commission, 2019, p.12). This approach, which consolidated the reputation of Leeuwarden as the “bottom-up cultural capital” (Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019, p.158), had the following implications. First, the programme did not aspire to high artistic quality even though it featured a few prestige events. Secondly, it brought a challenge of co-ordination due to its decentralised structure and the

large number of people participating. Thirdly, it stimulated broader cultural creation and participation by citizens who were not professionals or common cultural consumers (European Commission, 2019).

- According to the *Ex-post Evaluation Report* (European Commission, 2019), many aspects of the cultural programme focused on issues such as biodiversity, language, poverty and sustainable energy. This is perceived as part of a broader use of the concept of ‘culture’ (Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019, p.158) and its driving capacity for societal change.
- As part of its focus on cultural and environmental sustainability, the programme featured site-specific projects in unusual locations.
- Strong international and interdisciplinary collaboration supported the European dimension of the ECoC. According to the *Ex-post Evaluation Report* (European Commission, 2019, p.12), there were 1,600 international collaborations with 87 countries.
- Despite the traditional agricultural and tourism reputation that Leeuwarden and Friesland used to have, they both succeeded in projecting through the ECoC a new, open and innovative image (Monitoring and Evaluation of Fryslân-Leeuwarden, 2019).

2.3.2 Planned ECoC legacy and pre-COVID-19 challenges

According to the “Public Declaration of Intent Beyond 2018” presented in the bid book (Lwd2018 Foundation, 2013, p.34), an investment for legacy was planned as follows: Leeuwarden City Council would contribute 10% of its expenditure on culture to Lwd2018 for the five years following the event. This budget was meant for three broad aspects of the legacy: to deepen the coherence of the wider cultural offer, to further professionalise the cultural sector, and to maintain a distinct Frisian cultural climate.

The legacy plan included in the bid book featured the creation of permanent monuments and interventions in cultural and natural landscapes (fountains, a land art exhibition, a water science park and other interventions). There were also proposals for intangible legacies such as stronger European co-operation and citizen involvement. However, according to the ECoC’s monitoring and evaluation reports, the legacy strategy was weak and unclear: “plans were due to be announced in mid-2019, but some stakeholders felt that momentum may have been lost.” (European Commission, 2019, p.14)

Contrary to Aarhus 2017, the foundation that managed Leeuwarden 2018 acquired the responsibility for legacy, with the support of the Leeuwarden City Council. The foundation was rebranded as LF2028, and extended its activity for at least other 10 years. In July 2019, LF2028 presented a new programme called *Generation 2028* with specific goals, themes and working methods and in October 2020, the new members of the management team were appointed.

Legacy plans are built on the ECoC’s principles, and are focused on the following key proposals, included in the *Generation 2028* programme (LF2028, 2019):

- three 100-day triennials (2022, 2025 and 2028) with the title of Arcadia are all aimed at strengthening the region’s artistic and creative climate. The first triennial will be held from 7th May to 14th August 2022, under the theme “At the bottom of the sea”. It

“will focus on the strengths and challenges of rural areas such as Fryslân and start the conversation about the future of European regions.” (LF2028, n.d.)

- Application for the European Green Capital title by 2025.
- Application to UNESCO for the City of Literature title, which was granted at the end of 2019.
- For the bridge years 2019 and 2020, several projects and events were announced and organised. However, a substantial part of the programme for 2020 was postponed or cancelled due to COVID-19.
- *Mienskip* programme: based on the bottom-up approach used to build the programme of the ECoC, Generation 2028 will, on the one hand, promote and support the creation of community projects, and, on the other, promote participation to shape the artistic programmes for the triennials.

Sjoerd Bootsma, the current artistic director of Arcadia, identifies the following main challenges for the legacy of the ECoC: to achieve organisational independence for the foundation, to create an engaging programme, to continue the international work, to act as a flagship for the development of the Frisian cultural sector, and to attract less affluent international visitors (Paas, 2019).

2.4 Matera 2019

2.4.1 Context, concept, programme and key results

Matera is an Italian city of about 60,000 inhabitants. It is part of Basilicata, one of the regions of the south of Italy (the Mezzogiorno), which is generally poorer than the centre and north of the country. Basilicata consists of 2 provinces and 131 municipalities, and has approximately 600,000 inhabitants. Matera is considered a small city in both Italy and the Mezzogiorno: it does not have regional capital status, and the region is one of the least populated of the country. The fact of Matera 2019 holding the ECoC title is in line with a trend to also award the ECoC title to smaller European cities (Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019, p. 134).

During much of the 20th century, Matera’s image was that of a poor and partly abandoned city, mostly in “the margins of cultural production” (Matera 2019 Committee, 2014, p.1). Even by the time of its ECoC application, the city lacked cultural infrastructure, including performing arts venues (European Commission, 2020; Schneider and Jacobsen, 2019). However, Matera has a rich and long history and very distinctive architectural features in its city centre, and particularly in the area of ancient cave dwellings and churches known as Sassi di Matera, which, in 1993, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This feature of the city has driven the growth of national and international cultural tourism.

A key rationale for Matera’s bid was indeed related to the regeneration of the city’s identity as a place for culture, as well as for creation and experimentation: “can a small- to medium-sized city produce culture rather than import it?” (Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, 2021, p.11). This challenge of enhancing cultural vibrancy was also relevant for the entire Basilicata region. According to the bid book, the ECoC nomination resembled a “one-off opportunity to overcome centuries of scepticism and a sense of inferiority that has held back development in Italy’s South” (Matera 2019 Committee, 2014, p.4). Given the above

and following Aarhus 2017 and Leeuwarden 2018, Matera 2019 featured local and regional dimensions where topics such as the expansion of the city and remoteness were at the core of the discussions and programme.

The concept of the city's ECoC programme was *Open Future*, which appealed to an openness and accessibility for everyone based on the open data concept. The main approach was to adopt new and risky ideas; open up to Europe and instead of focusing on the traditions and cultural heritage that were already attracting visitors, to develop “collective experimentation” to try to deal with contemporary and future problems (Matera 2019 Committee, 2014).

Based on the above, the programme featured two flagship projects: I-DEA (Institute of Demo-Ethno-Anthropological Archive)¹, and the Open Design School (ODS)². Both had a planned continuation for the legacy phase.

I-DEA introduced a “new conception of a native European cultural institution of the 21st century” (Matera 2019 Committee, 2014, p. 51), which consisted of the digitalisation of archives that included public and private documents, as well as oral memories about the cultural life of Basilicata (European Commission, 2020). Following the ‘open’ concept, those archives were made accessible through a digital platform, but were also curated for five interrelated exhibitions to reconceptualise the archival materials from an artistic point of view.

The ODS was conceived as an art, design and technology laboratory for the citizens where they could learn, experiment and co-create in an interdisciplinary and horizontal manner. Under these conditions “it brought together authors, bloggers, designers, craftsmen, hackers, graduates, students and professionals” (European Commission, 2020, p. 4). Additionally, it served as a workshop to self-produce supplies, infrastructure and props for the cultural programme of the ECoC.

Other key aspects of the ECoC were:

- a participatory and horizontal approach, implemented in every stage of the ECoC: for the bidding process, the design and production of projects, co-creation activities and the cultural programme. In this way, a high level of citizen participation was achieved: around 60,000 citizens were involved in the activities and 600 people volunteered (European Commission, 2020, p. 5).
- Citizen participation was also encouraged by rethinking the concepts of ‘tourism’ and ‘citizenship’, through the implementation of the Matera 2019 Passport: a one-year ticket that invited audience members not residing in Matera to be ‘temporary citizens’ “so that everyone becomes an active part of a regeneration process of towns, cities and the local area.” (Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, n.d)
- Inclusion of population segments that are usually less involved whether for geographical, social, economic or motivational reasons: these included ethnic minorities, marginalised groups, migrants and residents of the outskirts of the city. (Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, 2021, p. 37)
- A strong regional dimension, with the involvement of each of the municipalities of the region, through the *Capitale per un giorno* (“Capital for one day”) project.

1 <https://idea.matera-basilicata2019.it/en>

2 <https://ods.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/>

- The activation of unusual spaces for culture, particularly in the remote areas, helped to overcome remoteness and the lack of cultural infrastructure. For example, the project “Venues of Matera”³ was the result of this approach, as the community collaborated in the mapping of 431 different locations in the Basilicata region that could host the cultural programme.
- Positive effects on the development of the city and region, as well as of the cultural and particularly tourism sectors: employment increased 10% in Matera and 4% in Basilicata, whereas tourism increased by about 200% (Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, 2021, p. 8). These numbers indicate that Matera 2019 was the ECoC with the most significant growth of tourism (Paternoster et al., 2020).

2.4.2 Planned ECoC legacies and pre-COVID-19 challenges

The Matera-Basilicata Foundation that oversaw the ECoC, was appointed to lead the legacy up to 2022. The foundation commissioned a report to an external advisor in order to evaluate its role and functions for the legacy phase, where inputs from different players involved in the process of Matera 2019 were collected (anonymous interview, 2021). The report concluded that the functioning of the foundation should be extended beyond 2022, as the main platform and facilitator of the development of culture in the region, and even in the south of Italy (PTSCLAS, 2020). Other recommendations, such as promoting co-creation and participation through an annual festival and continuing the work of the Open Design School, were also included in this report.

The bid book emphasised a legacy of skills, knowledge and capacity-building platforms (Matera 2019 Committee, 2014, p.36), which was supported by key infrastructure-like projects such as the I-DEA and the Open Design School. These key projects proposed in the bid book were created in a way that could be continued after the ECoC year as legacies.

In the *Legacy Pathways* report (Paternoster et al., 2020), co-creation, networking and regional development are highlighted among the key goals for the legacy phase. Furthermore, the primary future stages of the foundation are outlined, which include: the reflection and evaluation of successes and mistakes, a programme relaunch to develop a co-creation festival (whose first edition was held in the autumn of 2020), the distribution of the 2019 cultural products at European and international levels, the continuation of the ODS, and the strengthening of temporary citizenship projects in order to combat overtourism (p.27).

Finally, based on the achievements of the ECoC year, it was proposed that other components of Matera 2019 should become tangible legacies, such as the Venues of Matera mapping project; the Open Data Portal⁴, (offering data in an open format in order to inform people about the methods and results of the ECoC); and the Matera 2020 Citizens’ Manifesto⁵, a product of citizen participation and engagement processes.

In general terms, the legacy phase converged with a scenario where COVID-19 had taken hold. However, political instability was identified as a key challenge that existed even before the outbreak of the pandemic, and that not only impacted on the legacy but also on the planning and delivery of the ECoC as well. Despite obtaining political support and financing at the national (70%), local and regional (25%) levels, changes in government at

3 <http://venuesofmatera.matera-basilicata2019.it>

4 <https://opendata.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/>

5 <https://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/get-involved/citizens-manifesto.html>

the municipal level caused some delays in the initial planning and development of the ECoC (European Commission, 2020, p.3).

As for the legacy, there is a deep sense of uncertainty. According to one interviewee, political support is indispensable as it determines to a large extent the continuation of the foundation and its projects. Even though the Matera-Basilicata Foundation produced a report on the possible legacy strategy and secured some funding for its first stage in 2019, one interviewee noted that the local “politicians are not committed at all to understanding in which way to build new projects upon the legacy of Matera 2019”. This situation, combined with the arrival of the pandemic, delayed the responses by politicians on their support for the legacy phase, and hindered the foundation’s capacity for intervention. Uncertainty increased to a critical point. A member of the Matera 2019 team observed: “we don’t know what will happen in the very near future, we don’t know what will happen in two months”.

2.5 Emerging opportunities and issues: the impact of COVID-19 on the legacy of the three case studies

This section explores the impact of COVID-19 on different aspects of the three ECoCs presented above. It particularly focuses on their main achievements and legacy plans. General impacts on the cultural sector, and issues of cultural participation and tourism are also discussed.

2.5.1 Impacts on the cultural sector

When the COVID-19 outbreak occurred, there was a clear impact on the different cities with closure of businesses and lock down. Since then, the cultural sector has experienced much uncertainty financially but also operationally as the restrictions have been constantly changing according to the national status quo: “you don’t know when you can come back, you don’t know what kind of regulations there will be or when you can open” (anonymous interviewee, personal communication, 2021).

Even though all interviewees agreed that the pandemic severely affected the cultural sector in their cities and regions, the emergency was dealt with through varying approaches, some more effective than others: the representatives from Aarhus 2017 observe that despite the crisis and uncertainty, the cultural field in Denmark was preserved due to the support mechanisms implemented by the local and national governments. Conversely, the representative of Matera 2019 explains that the sector in the Basilicata region struggled not only due to lack of political support, but because the sector was still in development and therefore not strong enough to deal with a crisis of this magnitude.

As stated in Matera’s bid book and in reports by the European Commission, the city initially lacked cultural infrastructure and performance venues, so the ECoC represented an opportunity to develop the sector, something which was indeed achieved. However, the pandemic arrived right after the closure of Matera 2019. Aarhus, on the other hand, already had a strong infrastructure and a policy under development, key factors for the survival of the sector during the pandemic, and consequently for the legacy of the ECoC.

A second point that was revealed during the interviews was the difference between the public and independent sectors. All interviewees agreed that the latter sector in particular was adversely affected, as well as the “other freelance technicians and staff groups” (Ejgod

Hansen, interview, 2021) employed by the cultural field. The public sector possessed “some sort of muscle to fight through the crisis” (anonymous interviewee, personal communication, 2021), and therefore was able to handle the situation with extra advantage despite the loss of larger amounts of capital. One interviewee (personal communication, 2021) explained that in order to guarantee safety for the audiences, a large amount financial investment must be made: “you have to put in place a complex system of temperature control, sanitisation. You need a team responsible for safety, you need some stewards for the audience, so people don’t get too close to one another”. All these requirements bring about challenges and entail resources that smaller or independent organisations cannot afford.

Moreover, Ejgod Hansen (interview, 2021) added that in the case of Denmark, cultural institutions received more assistance through specific funds, while independent artists who earned modest sums from their work could only access unemployment benefits.

In general terms, the sector has reacted creatively to the pandemic, as there has been an urgent need to find different and innovative ways to make culture accessible to the public (anonymous interviewee, personal communication, 2021). However, the interviewees also perceived a reduction of new projects and a sense of fatigue: “they have been busy surviving so [they don’t] have time to think about development, and new networks and new projects” (anonymous interviewee, personal communication, 2021). Indeed, surviving is time consuming, and one interviewee (personal communication, 2021) expresses concern about the possible loss of cultural workers to other sectors, in the search for more opportunities and less uncertainty.

2.5.2 Impacts on audience participation, safety, and the example of Matera 2019

Regarding cultural participation, there is an agreement among most of the interviewees that audiences have a hunger for live culture, especially after a year of constant isolation and reduced human contact. One interviewee (personal communication, 2021) additionally highlights the fact that the enthusiasm for and engagement in co-creation processes achieved during the ECoC year in Matera, contributed to this urge to participate in cultural events. Nevertheless, Ejgod Hansen (interview, 2021) points out that the demographics on cultural consumption have not changed, at least in Denmark, as the need for participation has been only experienced by those who already consumed culture in a regular way before the lockdowns.

The interviewees also commented on the concerns of audiences, artists and cultural managers around safety, and the need for safe ways to deliver cultural events. This is one of the reasons why the Matera-Basilicata Foundation decided to use the co-creation festival planned in the legacy to explore different ways of creating safe places for culture. The *So Far, So Close* festival was organised in the autumn of 2020, when the rules allowed open-air public events. The foundation, by way of the Open Design School, studied and implemented safety protocols in order to host a total of 2,000 spectators for the different performances and workshops, in such a way that they could fully engage and feel safe. One interviewee (personal communication, 2021) says that as part of these explorations, they worked closely with an epidemiologist in order to find creative and friendly ways to communicate the

rules. Insights from this exploration were published in a manual⁶, which also gathers experiences from artists and cultural managers in Italy and internationally regarding cultural and artistic production in the times of COVID-19. This manual exemplifies good practice and could be shared with ECoCs and cultural producers, and further developed with the inclusion of other relevant experiences.

2.5.3 Political support and strategies for regeneration

The level of political support and the strategies for cultural regeneration have varied in different countries and cities. Even so, all interviewees agreed that the effects of the pandemic were positive in terms of stimulating debates on the value and role of culture, on culture-led regeneration, rethinking cities and new ways of living, as well as health and well-being. The acknowledgement of culture as a key element for development that was achieved during the ECoC years, was refreshed by the COVID-19 crisis in each of the three case study cities. Similarly, the dialogue between the cultural and political sectors was strengthened, though up to a point where the political positioning of culture was not worse, but also not improved (Ejgod Hansen, 2021). Nevertheless, the response in terms of policies and strategies for the cultural sector has been neither well organised nor prioritised:

“the municipalities taking part...said that they put culture high on the agenda...as...part of general development strategies. But when we look at the funding for culture, it didn't follow that (commitment). I think we have the same situation now...everyone acknowledges the role and value of culture, but I don't think investment will follow.” (Ejgod Hansen, 2021)

The representatives of all cities agreed that despite the increased dialogue, the cultural sector has not been a priority and therefore cultural activities will be among the last to restart.

In Aarhus, the situation is slightly different. Indeed, there have been support packages to preserve the cultural infrastructure of the city, but as explained above, these strategies did not necessarily suit everyone in the sector. One (2021) observes that there was an initial problem at the political level to understand the cultural sector's needs, which led to poor design and implementation of the support strategy on a national level. However, the growing interest and dialogue led to, for example, the creation of a reopening commission to include the cultural sector's needs. Other cited support mechanisms were the museum sector's initiative to offer free entrance to visitors during the summer of 2020. According to one interviewee (personal communication, 2021), this strategy helped restore audiences and surprisingly the museums witnessed a good numbers of visitors. At the local level, emergency funds were offered by the CDR and Aarhus City Council, in partnership with a private foundation that also supported the ECoC so “that is a track record of that foundation taking responsibility for culture in Aarhus, and also for collaborating and investing in what the municipality initiates” (Ejgod Hansen, 2021). Simultaneously, the city and the region developed a new cultural policy which is built on the ECoC's achievements and is strongly focused on “reopening and repositioning” culture in the city.

⁶ <https://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/news/2740-il-manuale-so-far-so-close-pratiche-di-vicinanza-infra-pan-demiche.html>

2.5.4 Welfare and culture and health strategies

The pandemic has definitely increased awareness of welfare and the relationship between culture and health. According to one interviewee (personal communication, 2021), the Aarhus City Council adopted a plan for health and culture at the end of 2020, and the municipality's Health Department introduced a separate funding scheme aimed at taking arts activities to nursing homes. Nevertheless, both in Matera and Aarhus, this is an area that before the pandemic was already considered in the legacy programmes and policy strategies. The pandemic has not introduced but has rather increased the importance of this approach to cultural policy and programming.

2.5.5 Regional collaborations and partnerships

The regional approach was a strong aspect in all three of the case studies, and therefore a major part of their legacy. Despite the crisis generated by the pandemic, regional collaboration continues to be strong, and the interviewees do not identify significant impacts except from possible delays and minor dropouts. It seems that as this aspect was already strong from the bidding and preparation phase, and successfully led during the ECoC year, the arrangements for regional collaboration left as a legacy managed to survive in a period of crisis. Such arrangements were useful for the CDR to develop new projects during the pandemic.

— anonymous interviewee, personal communication, 2021

2.5.6 International collaborations

Unlike the regional approach, the international collaborations and exchanges were severely affected, despite good results during the ECoC. The interviewees said that international activity is strategically important and urgently needed at this time but, due to the pandemic, it was largely paused. Public health regulations still create huge uncertainty about this aspect of cultural activity.

Given the border restrictions, the cultural and tourism sectors turned almost completely to a domestic focus. This was reinforced by public subsidies and support programmes. However, such support strategies completely failed to compensate for “losses regarding international activities” (Ejgod Hansen, 2021). However, our interviewees suggest that their international ambitions are active and that they are hoping to restart international work as soon as possible.

2.5.7 Digital tools

With the arrival of the pandemic, the use of digital tools was greatly extended. On the one hand, these tools brought about the possibility to open up social interaction during isolation, and in practical terms to carry out remote and international work. On the other hand, critical questions have been raised about digital tools in relation to cultural consumption, creative work and co-creation.

The interviewees first agreed that there has been a saturation of digital experiences, engendering fatigue and the need for physical interaction. Their conclusion is that the

digital world will not replace live experiences. Secondly, the approach to digital resources should be rethought, as the offer has been reduced, in general, to live streaming. Thirdly, digital education and infrastructure are strongly needed, including capacity building on digital audience development.

Given these factors and through observation of the legacy programmes, we conclude that the three ECoCs prioritised the possibility of having cultural live experiences adapted to the restrictions, rather than saturating audiences with digital experiences.

2.5.8 Artistic programmes

In general terms, there were no big impacts on the legacy programmes. A large number of projects that were to be held during 2020–2021 were paused or postponed, while others, a minority events, were cancelled. It is uncertain if and when it will be possible to deliver the paused or postponed projects. However, one interviewee (personal communication, 2021) comments that the pandemic mostly affected the processes and timetables but not the artistic programme itself. For example, in the case of Music City Aarhus, the difficulties are rather related to finding partnerships and funding.

The pandemic inspired aspects of cultural programming. One example is the *So Far, So Close* festival in Matera. It was initially proposed in the legacy plan as a co-creation festival that would have continued the regional and international dimensions of the ECoC. The ‘exercises in closeness’ concept, the whole artistic programme and the creative approach to safety protocols were all inspired by the new conditions created by the pandemic.

The Leeuwarden 2028 organisation also supported and was involved in projects that were encouraged by the pandemic: in April 2020, there was a project on displaying artistic messages on drones for the isolated citizens; in August 2020, they organised a corona-proof open-air cinema on wheels; and in relation to the triennial, Arcadia, they created an open call for developing cultural projects in the city to break through loneliness.

2.5.9 Volunteer programmes

The cultural offer and participation were reduced for all three ECoC cases. Therefore, it is not surprising that the volunteer programmes also reduced their activities. Initially, the volunteers in Aarhus were transferred to the cultural tourism sector, which was strongly hit by the pandemic. The volunteers in Matera, on the other hand, continued their work in the cultural sector, including on the *So Far, So Close* festival.

The volunteer programmes were strong legacies of the three ECoCs as a result of citizen engagement and participation. Despite the reduction of the number of volunteers and activities for them, in the case of Aarhus, the support and funding had been already secured, while in Matera, an independent organisation had been created in order to continue to develop cultural volunteering. One interviewee (personal communication, 2021) comments that the knowledge and experience acquired by the head of the volunteer programme is an important active in the legacy of Aarhus.

2.5.10 Tourism and cultural vibrancy

The levels of cultural vibrancy and tourism attractiveness reached during the ECoC year were strongly affected by the pandemic. Aarhus achieved the character of a tourist city in Denmark, and the region was in the process of developing that quality through the VisitAarhus brand. However, the tourism sector experienced a fall of 41% (anonymous interview, personal communication, 2021). Similarly, Matera, which grew considerably in tourism terms due to the ECoC, recorded a decrease of 30% in 2020, corresponding to over 224,000 fewer tourists than in 2019 and putting € 41 million (-32.2%) of turnover in the sector at risk (SRM, 2020).

As was suggested earlier, the border and travel restrictions led to an acute sense of uncertainty for international tourism, particularly in the case of Matera, where participation by foreign visitors was quite considerable compared to Aarhus, whose cultural offer was mostly directed at local audiences. This situation is therefore leading the ECoC teams to focus on domestic tourism, and on refreshing the discussions held in Matera on combating the problem of overtourism by offering “temporary citizenship” to tourists and by adopting quality tourism strategies, as well as by taking advantage of the configuration of the city as an open-air museum (SRM, 2020).

Regarding cultural vibrancy, even though the interviewees agreed that their respective brands were either strong or surviving, the pandemic and other challenges discussed earlier generated a fear of losing momentum and of residents forgetting culture as an important source of pride in their cities.

2.6 Future challenges

The cases presented in this section of the report have proved how challenging the planning and development of a legacy was for the three ECoCs, both before and during the pandemic. Given the long-term character of the legacy and the current stage of the pandemic, it may be too early to offer final conclusions. Nevertheless, some key issues can be highlighted and discussed.

From the analysis of the three case studies, we can say that, thus far, COVID-19 has affected their legacy plans to a modest extent. So far, the primary challenges brought about by the pandemic are related to uncertainty in the international arenas, such as artistic exchanges and collaboration and the big reductions in international tourism and audiences. Many projects were paused and processes became slower; however, the ambitions and resources were mostly maintained. Particularly, the achievements and structures that were already strong during the ECoC were not severely affected, such as regional collaborations, the volunteer programmes, and the citizen engagement and participation strategies. This demonstrates how crucial the bidding and preparatory phases are, not only for securing and strengthening the legacy, but for protecting it in a period of crisis.

By the same token, the issues that the legacy strategies faced before the pandemic continued and even worsened during the period of crisis. The lack of political support in Matera and the uncoordinated strategy in Aarhus can be deemed the biggest challenges for the two ECoCs – unrelated to the pandemic but caused by problems or gaps during the planning and implementation phases of the ECoCs. Subsequently, the cultural sector and the legacy of Matera were further abandoned on the political level, as the pandemic

encouraged the prioritisation of other sectors; whereas the momentum and visibility of Aarhus' legacy, already threatened by piecemeal strategy, now ran the risk of being lost in the post-pandemic period.

Another learning point highlighted by this study is that political support is a major determinant in the continuation of the ECoC project. It is indispensable to understand that the ECoCs are massive development projects that strongly need political support. As one interviewee noted: "it is really a strategic plan for the future, for culture in the cities, so somehow politicians are able to determine the duration of the project [...] the political weight... is very powerful". The case of Matera is an example of how a good legacy project and momentum can be largely compromised by lack of support; whereas Aarhus proves that despite problems of legacy planning, the cultural policy strategies and political support have created stable conditions for the cultural sector to weather the COVID-19 crisis, and maybe secure the development of the city in the long-term as a continuation of the ECoC legacy.

CHAPTER 3: Galway 2020 and Rijeka 2020

3.1. Context

The two cities, Rijeka in Croatia and Galway in Ireland, which were ECoCs for the year 2020, were the unlucky laboratories for what happens when a pandemic takes over. With limited resources, they were suddenly forced to first suspend their programmes right after they started in the beginning of the year, to revise their plans (regardless of the uncertainty for the future) and to find alternative ways to deliver the cultural programmes themselves. This raised a lot of challenges and many of the projects for the year had to be greatly altered or left out. However, these challenges also inspired new approaches and innovation and the experiences they had can be of great value for future ECoCs and for the cultural sector internationally.

This section of the report recounts what happened in both cities during the delivery of their programme in 2020–2021 (the ECoC title was extended by the European Commission until April 2021). This section also takes a look at the bidding phase and considers the legacy plans the cities have for the future. We begin by providing some background and context for both ECoCs, and then proceed to discuss issues and findings discovered through the analysis of the bid books and of media coverage. Interviews with personnel working in both ECoCs were conducted as part of this research. We interviewed Rijeka Emina Višnić (chief executive officer until June 2020 and head of programme from July 2020 onwards) and a representative of Galway 2020. We conclude by offering some considerations about future challenges and suggestions for further research.

3.2 Rijeka

Rijeka is the third largest city in Croatia and is located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The city's population is about 128,600, with about 245,000 inhabitants in the metropolitan area (Wikipedia, 1.12.2021). Its distance to the capital of Croatia, Zagreb, is approximately 150 kilometres. Rijeka has a history as an important harbour city with a background in shipbuilding and maritime transport. Most of the inhabitants are Croats (over 80%), along with minorities of Serbs, Bosnians and Italians. The most spoken languages are Croatian and Italian. Rijeka is also the home of a unique dialect, known as the Venetian language, which is spoken by about 20,000 of the city's residents. The Croatian National Theatre Ivan pl. Zaje is located in Rijeka alongside the University of Rijeka. Rijeka is well-known for its International Carnival, an annual event held between January and March (Rijeka 2020 – Bid Committee, 2016 and the City of Rijeka, 2021).

Recently, Rijeka has been facing many challenges connected to economic and social issues. An ageing population, unemployment and young people's emigration are influencing the city's demography and economy. These challenges were stated in Rijeka's bid books as starting points and among the main arguments for why the city should win the ECoC title

for 2020. The ECoC year was seen by local policy makers as a way to transform the post-industrial city into “a city of education, culture and tourism” (Rijeka 2020 – Bid committee, 2015, p. 6) and as an opportunity to modernise the cultural sector.

The University of Rijeka was a major partner for Rijeka 2020. An in-depth collaboration agreement for research and long-term planning was developed between Rijeka 2020 and the university. Other major local institutions involved in the ECoC year were the Croatian National Theatre, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Arts, the City of Rijeka Museum, the Rijeka City Library, the art cinema, the puppet theatre and a few other museums focused on history and natural sciences. The institutions hosted a somewhat more ‘traditional’ programme, but also the urban spaces of Rijeka were to be utilised as stages and venues, especially for urban visual arts in projects called Lungomare Arts and Sweet and Salt (Rijeka 2020 – Bid Committee, 2016 and Rijeka 2020, 2020).

The themes for Rijeka’s ECoC year are Water, Work and Migrations. Water is connected to Rijeka’s location by the sea and to its history as a harbour city. Work is connected to the transformation the city has gone through in the last two decades with the collapse of industrial production that led to economic and social challenges. These challenges are spotlighted under the theme, but also new potential and possibilities are explored. The third theme, Migrations, is inspired by Rijeka’s history and by different, intertwined cultures in the area (Rijeka 2020 – Bid Committee, 2016). The programme was planned to start on 1st February 2020 and to continue until the end of January 2021. It was to consist of over 300 cultural projects with more than 600 individual events, with 350 partner organisations and collaborations with more than 55 countries in Europe and worldwide (Rijeka 2020, 2020, p. 22). On 1st February, a big special event and many smaller events were organised. A carnival planned to take place on the same date was postponed until the end of February. The operating budget in total was an estimated €30,327,000 with €3 million coming from the private sector and the rest from the public sector (Rijeka 2020 – Bid Committee, 2016, p. 86).

3.3. Galway

Galway is also a coastal city, situated in the west of Ireland on the Atlantic Ocean. Its population of 75,500 people makes it the third biggest city in the country. Overall, 24% of the city’s population is born outside of Ireland and this is due to work-related migration which has had a notable influence during Galway’s history. A high number of Galway residents have also moved to another country. Galway is the capital of Gaeltacht, the parts of Ireland where the Irish language is spoken. To the west of the city is the region of Connemara, where the Irish language is dominant. Three higher education institutes are located in the city, and one fourth of the city’s population are students. In all, 35% of the city’s population is under 35 years old, and the number of 20–24 year olds is twice the national average (Galway 2020 Team, 2016 and Galway City Council, 2021).

In Galway, there is an ongoing shift where traditional values are challenged and rural areas are facing depopulation. There are also structural challenges in the cultural sector, which has suffered from a lack of investment due to the city’s overall economic instability. In the 1970s and 1980s there was a revival of cultural life and the establishment of new arts organisations, but since then, a lack of resources has been a major issue. As in the case of Rijeka, the ECoC year was seen as an opportunity to invest in the cultural sector and to revitalise tourism (Galway 2020 Team, 2016).

The themes chosen for Galway's ECoC year were migration, landscape and language. The Migration theme was connected with the city's long history of emigration and immigration. The landscape theme explored the city's location by the sea, with harsh weather and a seascape of inhabited islands. The Language theme put an emphasis on the Irish language, which is threatened with extinction, in addition to other languages spoken in the area due to immigration. The programme was shaped under the title of 'Making Waves' and planned to follow Ireland's ancient Celtic calendar and its four fire seasons. The ECoC year's programme was built with over 100 partnerships from 30 different countries consisting of more than 150 projects with almost 2,000 different events (Galway 2020, 2019, p. 9). The operating budget was almost €46 million, with 15% of the funding coming from the private sector and the rest from public sources (Galway 2020 Team, 2016, p. 85).

3.4 Emerging issues and opportunities

3.4.1 Revised cultural programmes and HR issues

In the beginning of their ECoC title year, Galway faced challenges not only connected to the pandemic but also to geography and climate: exceptionally bad weather caused the cancellation of the opening ceremony at the beginning of February. These challenges were soon to be accompanied by the pandemic that caused both Galway and Rijeka to cancel, postpone and revise their programme for the year. The timeline for Rijeka was as follows: on 12th March 2020 all events in the cultural programme were postponed until further notice. In April 2020, the majority of activities were again suspended. A crisis management proposal was prepared and sent to the Ministry of Culture for approval of the financial implications. After approval, revised programmes were launched for May–June and July–August 2020. (Rijeka 2020, 2021).

In Galway, a revised programme until April 2021 was launched in August 2020 after an intense period of revision and planning in co-operation with the partners. Before the launch, only a few projects were shown online (Galway 2020, 2021 and personal communication, 2021). Soon after the pandemic started, both cities had to make most of their staff redundant. In Rijeka, 59 people were dismissed, leaving only a few working for the ECoC (Rijeka 2020, 2021). In Galway, the staff of 36 people was reduced to 9 (personal communication, 2021). For both cities, this was done due to economic pressures to revise the budget, but also, as a representative of Galway 2020 (*ibid.*) points out, because there simply was not work around for everyone to do.

For both cities, this had additional effects. For Rijeka, it was felt that the letting go of so many staff members harmed the integrity of the programme, creating distrust from the cultural sector and the public (Tkalčić, 2020). In Galway, the job cuts included the creative director Helen Marriage, who had been appointed in January 2019. Since then, she had made some changes to the programme such as adding projects connected to the local BAME population since she felt that the programme presented in the bid books did not reflect the multicultural character of the area (Hadley, 2020). However, when revising the programme, Galway 2020 made the decision to leave out all elements of the programme not mentioned in the bid books (anonymous interview, 2021).

For the revised programme, Rijeka and Galway took different approaches. For Rijeka, revising meant considering which projects could be delivered regardless of the pandemic

and which could take place with moderate alterations. During the summer of 2020, due also to a slightly improved status quo with regard to COVID-19, Rijeka was able to deliver 390 different events with 53,000 visitors (Rijeka 2020, 2021). For Galway, the approach for the ECoC title year from the beginning was to showcase the development and production done during the bidding phase. The Galway 2020 team delivered most of the cultural programme planned before the pandemic, by transforming it for different digital platforms (anonymous interviewee, personal communication, 2021).

3.4.2 Effects on different art forms

For both cities, it seems that the pandemic caused programmers to privilege some art forms and neglect others. In Rijeka, for example, the Lungomare Art flagship survived rather well, since it consisted mostly of outdoor visual urban art. Visual arts with public sculptures and art installations and exhibitions were also easier to deliver during the pandemic, but performing arts activities, including concerts and other large-scale events had to be postponed or cancelled (Višnić, interview, 2021). According to our interviewee (personal communication, 2021), in Galway, theatre, music and other live performance were the most adversely affected and programmes designed to take place indoors or including communication between the artists and the audience or local community had to be altered. So overall, the performing arts were most affected by the pandemic. As Emina Višnić (interview, 2021) stated, more creative and innovative solutions to produce and perform this kind of content would have been needed during these challenging times.

3.4.3 Approaches to digital programming

Rijeka and Galway had a very different approach to digital work during their ECoC planning process and the title year. As early as the bid phase, Galway had aimed to be the first 'Virtual Capital of Culture' with a separate digital strategy, with wide-reaching plans for collaborations to develop and utilise different digital technologies and platforms. The ambition was to have 60% of the programme either entirely digital or with a significant digital existence (Galway 2020 Team, 2016). Even though most of these ambitious plans did not happen as planned (anonymous interview, 2021), this approach must certainly have helped Galway offer its programme online.

For Rijeka, this was not the case. After the pandemic began, there was only a limited online programme, including a reading club, a short story writing competition and a virtual tour (Rijeka 2020, 2021). Nor did the revised programme include much digital or streamed work. Some digital content was produced from exhibitions and other visual arts events. Emina Višnić (interview, 2021) explains this choice from a few different perspectives. Digital was not seen as an alternative for the work already done, since it could not replace the live experience for the audience. Also, the production processes would need to be different since different platforms require different kinds of production methods and choices. In addition, adding more digital dimensions to people's lives could be seen as ethically questionable, especially for young people and children who had already spent so much of their time with technological devices.

Galway's choice to have most of the programme online did have its downsides. The younger 'digital native' audience was easier to keep on board, but the programmes for, or

designed to be created with, the older people suffered. A representative of Galway 2020 (personal communication, 2021) observes that the audiences who were likely to attend events in person were less likely to view them online. In addition, not all of these audiences have access to digital technology, and this made them harder to reach as a target group.

Galway's extensive online offer attracted new international audiences, but participatory programmes with the local community were disadvantaged, as did teenage audiences who lost in-person contacts planned through the programme. So overall in Galway's case, it can be concluded that the pandemic favoured international and young audiences at the expense of older and local people. A representative of Galway 2020 (*ibid.*) notices some audience fatigue – after spending the whole day working remotely from home in front of a computer, people tend to be less likely to attend cultural programmes or other leisure activities online.

3.4.4 Local communities, minorities and disadvantaged social groups

Both cities had placed significant emphasis on the local community as early as the bidding phase, and this approach was embedded in the cultural projects initiated by the two ECoCs. For Rijeka, a flagship project called 27 Neighborhoods was completely dedicated to the local community. In Galway it was the same with Small Towns, Big Ideas (Višnić, interview, 2021 and anonymous interview, 2021). Both projects connected the city to its rural surroundings and aimed to showcase the uniqueness of the area. For Rijeka, it was announced when the pandemic started that the role of the local community would be enlarged as the international programme could not be delivered as planned (Rijeka 2020, 2021). However, the implementation of this stated intention could not be verified in this study. According to Višnić (interview, 2021), the involvement of the locals was difficult especially during the first months of the pandemic, as people were in shock and there was a general ban on any social gatherings. When people's life and health are at risk, it's not easy to motivate them to focus on culture and leisure. The emptiness of the city's streets was an especially sad contrast to the opening ceremony, which had a unique atmosphere with a strong sense of community, where people were joyfully and freely meeting each other on the streets and other public locations.

When considering local minorities and disadvantaged social groups, Višnić (*ibid.*) explains that Rijeka 2020 didn't have programmes designed especially for them. The approach of the Rijeka 2020 team was not to develop projects designed for certain specific target groups. They wanted all audiences to be invited to enjoy all content. This is not to say Rijeka did not collaborate with minorities in the event itself. For example, they planned the food festival Porto Etno with national minorities and a festival with the local LGBT community. The aim was to give a stage and voice to marginalised groups, while offering a programme which was accessible and open to all. A representative of Galway 2020 (interview, 2021) observes that people dealing with domestic violence, and people with mental health problems, were in an especially vulnerable position during the pandemic. The issue of mental health became very prominent during the COVID-19 crisis and the Galway representative notes that it was important that Galway 2020 didn't put too much pressure on these groups to deliver promised or planned programmes during such challenging times.

3.4.5 *The roles of volunteers*

For both cities, volunteers proved to be an important aid after the pandemic began. In Rijeka and Galway, the volunteers were trained to help during the events to make sure that people were following COVID-19 guidelines on masks and social distancing (Višnić and anonymous interviewee, interviews, 2021). In Galway, volunteers were also on site when filming or streaming any programme content to make sure that the COVID-19 guidelines were adhered to (anonymous interviewee, interview, 2021). Especially in Galway, the volunteers also helped with the additional paperwork (on risk assessment and scenario planning, for example) generated by the pandemic.

3.4.6 *Economic aspects*

The economic effects of the pandemic were significant. The direct consequence was naturally on box office sales and related cashflow. These were mentioned as the central issue on the economic side for both cities (Višnić and anonymous interviewee, interviews, 2021). Another major aspect was sponsorship. Višnić (interview, 2021) points out that in the case of Rijeka some of the biggest sponsorship deals were lost because they were connected to large events, which had to be cancelled. Businesses also closed down due to the pandemic, and they were not able to support the cultural sector as planned (anonymous interviewee, 2021).

In addition to these consequences of the pandemic concerning private sector funding, the support the ECoCs received from national and local government was also affected. In the case of Rijeka, this income was approximately halved for the years 2020–2021 (Višnić interview, 2021) – a consequence of changed spending priorities during the pandemic. In Rijeka’s case, the earthquakes that took place in March 2020 ruined some of Croatia’s heritage buildings, which had to be considered in the state budget for culture (*ibid.*).

Both ECoCs had to adapt and balance their budgets accordingly. Both had to revise their programmes and make most of their staff redundant. The secondary effects also started also piling up. The aspirations of both cities that the ECoC year would revitalise the cultural sector and tourism were now severely challenged. During the summer of 2020, the city’s health numbers improved slightly and some tourists were able to experience the programme that was offered in Rijeka, but this was small compared to the original targets (Višnić, interview, 2021).

3.4.7 *Support from the European Union and local politics*

When considering the actions taken by the European Union as the pandemic unfolded, key stakeholders in the two cities had somewhat different opinions of its success. In an official proposal from the European Commission dated 18th August 2020, it was proposed that Rijeka and Galway would be given the “possibility to implement their programmes until 30 April 2021 without changing the year of designation” (European Commission, 2020). In Galway, this decision was welcome. The extension was something they had been hoping for (anonymous interviewee, 2021). The interviewee (*ibid.*) added that Galway 2020 were given the possibility to extend the programme funded by Creative Europe for the legacy period, which was also beneficial. According to Višnić (interview, 2021) however, the de-

cision to extend the year of culture came as a surprise and it seems that there was a lack of communication between the European Commission and the City of Rijeka. Višnić also observes that the extension until the end of April was irrational: as the pandemic tended to decline in the summer it may have been more beneficial to prolong the title year until the end of summer 2021. This would have made it easier to deliver more programme events. In addition, it would have been beneficial if the decision had come with some extra financial support from the European Union (EU). Aside from their different opinions, both Višnić and the Galway 2020 representative mentioned a somewhat complex bureaucratic process that had to be gone through between the ministries of culture of both countries and the European Commission, which did not allow direct communication between the two ECoCs and the Commission.

Emina Višnić (interview, 2021) fundamentally criticises the way the ECoCs are funded: they do not sign any contract with the EU and the very limited funding provided by the EU itself (the €1.5m Melina Mercouri prize) is discretionary. Both Ireland and Croatia went through parliamentary elections in the spring of 2020. The uncertain electoral climate did not make the process of the two national governments making decisions about how to support the two ECoCs any easier or faster.

3.4.8 The pandemic's effects on legacy strategies

Both Galway and Rijeka benefited from work that had begun during the bidding phase. A representative of Galway 2020 (interview, 2021) explains that Galway adopted an approach early on where the 41 partners engaged in the delivery of the ECoC year had been encouraged to develop their projects since 2016. This was to be done by strengthening European connections and collaborations and engaging in capacity building and collaborations with the local community. This proactive approach endowed them with a resource of developed content and tools when the pandemic began. Even though it wasn't possible any longer to collaborate with European partners in person, much of the co-operation had already taken place and the results of this development work could be delivered digitally, at least to some extent. For Galway, the focus on these European connections were especially important since the city, throughout its history, had been more connected to the US and the UK than the European continent. The connections and collaborations developed for the ECoC year are of great value for the legacy of Galway 2020 and for the city's arts organisations. Equally in Rijeka, activities were already underway in 2016, including different kinds of festivals, various exhibitions, a capacity building programme, co-productions, as well as international partnerships and projects. Twenty-seven neighbourhoods have been developing their local initiatives and connections to their international partners. (Višnić, interview, 2021 and Rijeka 2020 – Bid committee, 2016).

In Rijeka, a lot of investment prior to the title year had been made in the local cultural infrastructure. Višnić (*ibid.*) estimates that facilities totalling approximately 27,000 square metres were built or renovated (although some are still not finished) for the cultural sector in the city – the biggest investment in cultural venues in more than 50 years. For example, the former Benčić, engines and tractors factory was transformed into a venue that would host the Rijeka City Museum, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Arts, the City Library and the Children's House. This also included the Sugar Refinery Palace, a lavish Baroque building that was now renovated. In addition, the former official yacht of the presi-

dent of former SFRY Galeb was refurbished to become a cultural venue, hosting exhibitions, a cinema and creative workshops, in addition to a hostel and a restaurant (Rijeka 2020, 2021b). These tangible investments will definitely remain in the city, but for Rijeka then the question is how these venues will be financially supported in the future. Višnić (interview, 2021) points out that once the contracts for the people working for Rijeka 2020 end, there is an open question about what will come after. Further investment in the new venues would also benefit the tourism industry.

Another important result of the Rijeka 2020 initiative noted by Emina Višnić (*ibid.*) is the investment it made in people. She explains that it was a strategic priority from the beginning to invest in human capital through training schemes and by letting younger, less experienced people take part in organising, managing and programming the ECoC. There was also strong collaboration during the whole EcoC process with the University of Rijeka, which now has a new programme focused on urban research and architecture. This programme is an important legacy of the ECoC process. Our interviewee from Galway 2020 (personal communication, 2021) also points out that the collaborations of Galway 2020 with local schools will continue as a key aspect of the ECoC's legacy.

The independent cultural sector suffered the most both in Galway and Rijeka, like in other European cities, during the pandemic. At the start of the pandemic freelance artists were the most disadvantaged, since in many cases their income was more dependent on cancelled events. These artists would have benefited greatly from some form of local support, which was not available. Višnić (interview, 2021) explains that freelance artists found themselves in a place where no public institution felt responsible for supporting them and thus faced major difficulties to continue their work.

Unfortunately, information about Galway's legacy strategy was not available at the time of the research. Nevertheless, our interviewee (personal communication, 2021) states that the cultural sector in Galway gained confidence and sustainability during the ECoC year. The European collaborations and networks that were created will be of great value in the future (anonymous interview, *ibid.*). One particular benefit she points out is the local cultural sector's familiarisation with reporting. The cultural partners had to become accustomed to it during 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic's new reporting demands. For Rijeka, the legacy period remains largely a mystery since the resources that will be available for it are still unknown. There was an initial plan to use the €1.5m Melina Mercouri prize received from the EU as a way to fund the projects during the legacy period, but due to the pandemic, it had to be allocated to contributing to funding the title year itself (Višnić, interview, 2021).

3.5 Future challenges

Clearly missing from this research are the voices of audiences, of local communities and of ECoC partners and artists. Questions such as the following would have to be asked to complete this work: How did partners and artists experience the situation during the pandemic, and what kind of support would they have hoped to receive? Which challenges did they face, and what did they learn when forced to work under such challenging circumstances? How did the pandemic affect audiences, and how did local communities experience the situation? How could the ECoC have supported them?

One conclusion from the cases of Rijeka and Galway is that there seems to be some detachment between the political and governmental level in both countries and the ECoC, and

also a lack of genuine communication between the ECoC and the European Union, which is at least partly due to bureaucratic procedures. ECoCs are very exposed to changes in the political climate of their countries. A deeper integration of the cultural strategies connected to the ECoC title into the work and priorities of local political institutions would assure greater stability for the ECoC project during the bidding phase, the title year itself and the legacy period. Such levels of integration could even be part of the criteria in the ECoC selection process.

For the future, one key issue will be finding a balance between the live programme and online platforms as both arenas for the cultural programme and as places for collaboration. Rijeka and Galway are interesting examples of this, since they had rather different approaches to the digital programmes even prior to the pandemic. Rijeka decided to invest and focus more on live experience, and not to create digital alternatives for the delivery of the programme when the pandemic began. In Galway, the digital dimension was embedded in the programme from the beginning, and this approach provided the Irish ECoC with useful tools and ready platforms when the pandemic forced most of the live programme to close. In both cities, there were also recognised drawbacks to digital solutions, such as difficulties to reach all age groups and minorities, and online audience fatigue. It seems that digitalisation was a tool to reach more international audiences, but may have resulted in problems reaching and engaging with local communities.

One important question is also how to support all art forms equally **during** a pandemic. Visual outdoor arts are in a strong position here, but alternative solutions are needed for the performing arts. The pandemic also seems to have widened the gulf between the institutionalised arts and art that is created by freelancers and independent artists. For cultural institutions, the financial and operating environment are more stable in times of crisis, while freelancers may be left with next to nothing. It would be important to consider how the independent sector could be better supported during similar crises in the future.

A clear lesson from both Rijeka and Galway is that the bidding phase is very important. For Rijeka, the investments made during the bidding phase in cultural infrastructure will continue to benefit the city in the future. Galway's approach to utilising the ECoC title year as an opportunity to showcase the work done during the bid phase proved beneficial not only for the delivery of the programme, but also for the cultural sector, which had been activated prior to the title year. The work done during the bid phase was especially important for the two cities, given their difficulties delivering their programmes in 2020–21 due to the pandemic.

Long-term planning also seems to be beneficial to the whole ECoC process with regard to legacy issues, and is especially valuable in building lasting partnerships, as Rijeka did with the local university. For Galway, the emphasis on the European dimension and the networks created during the bid phase with local and European partners seem to have been especially important. In addition, for Galway, there was a crisis within a crisis – they faced additional challenges in the form of adverse weather. While it is hard to estimate when the next pandemic will be, we can perhaps more easily assume that extreme weather conditions will occur all over the world in the near future. Thus, strategic preparation for different kinds of crises is wise: ECoC organisers should invest in sustainable long-term planning to gain benefits even if the delivery of the event needs to be cancelled or greatly altered on short notice.

Galway and Rijeka serve as unfortunate but important laboratories to see how ECoCs could operate when facing a pandemic or other unexpected major incidents. There was some collaboration between Galway and Rijeka to discuss good practices and to share lessons learnt. However, Višnić (interview, 2021) points out that it was not easy to learn from each other, as both cities were in the same problematic and turbulent situation. There has been interest in the partner-led model that Galway created for its ECoC year, and further adapted to the COVID-19 emergency (anonymous interview, 2021). It seems that there would be scope for closer collaboration between ECoCs to learn from the approaches adopted by Rijeka and Galway during the pandemic.

CHAPTER 4: Novi Sad 2021/2022), Kaunas 2022, Eleusis 2021/2023, and Tartu 2024

4.1 Context

The European Capitals of Culture Novi Sad 2021 (Novi Sad), Kaunas 2022 (Kaunas), Eleusis 2021 (City of Elefsina) and Tartu 2024 (Tartu) experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways. Funding, artistic vision, approaches to planning, the role of the ECoC and the opportunities and limitations of digitalisation are among the areas under consideration. The change of timing of the delivery of the ECoC is one visible aspect of the coronavirus pandemic. Novi Sad 2021 moved to 2022 and Eleusis 2021 to 2023, while Kaunas 2022 and Tartu 2024 will take place as planned. Additionally, the areas affected the most by the COVID-19 crisis differ based on the different stages of programme preparation that cities had achieved when the pandemic began. Novi Sad's challenges differ from the implications of COVID-19 for Tartu 2024, which as yet still does not hold the title. Interestingly, all cities apart from the city of Elefsina are the second largest cities in their respective countries.

When asked about support received from the EU, the four ECoCs confirmed that the European Commission (EC) provided advice and guidance, but no financial help. Novi Sad mentioned good communications and the EC's representatives' understanding of the issues caused by the pandemic (Foundation "Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture", 2021). Similarly, Eleusis' application to postpone the title year was approved quickly (Eleusis 2023 ECoC, 2021). Tartu also received advice from the EC on how to handle the issues caused by the pandemic (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021).

The case studies are based on the information from the ECoC's websites, bid books, monitoring reports, and news articles, as well as written interviews with the Foundation "Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture", the Eleusis 2021 Municipal S.A., the Tartu 2024 Foundation, and an interview with Dovilė Butnoriūtė, the head of International Relations at Kaunas 2022 at the European Capital of Culture Foundation. For the Novi Sad case study, Radivoje Dinulović (architect, scenographer, and Professor at the University of Novi Sad) was also interviewed.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section presents short backgrounds of each ECoC, outlining the key goals and programme themes, and providing a brief overview of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in each country. The second section structures the data collected from the published materials and from the interviews. The COVID-19 impact examples from the four ECoCs are grouped into the following main categories and sub-categories:

Relationships with stakeholders:

1. Financial impact
2. Relationship with municipal and national authorities

3. Interaction with the local arts and culture scene

4. International co-operation

Operations:

5. Cultural programme and artistic projects

6. Planning and organising

7. ECoC teams

Hot topics:

8. Digitalisation

9. Economic regeneration

10. Culture and well-being

Miscellaneous:

11. Volunteers

12. Hindsight

The third section aims to distil the broader trends emerging across the four ECoCs. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research.

Novi Sad (<https://novisad2021.rs/en/>) is an industrial and financial centre located on the river Danube in northern Serbia close to the borders with Romania and Hungary. Serbia is an EU candidate country and the main theme of the Novi Sad 2021 cultural programme is rebuilding and establishing new links with Europe and the rest of the world (City of Novi Sad, 2015, pp.11–18). Other goals include: a) for the city to regain its status as a key player in the cultural field in Serbia; b) supporting intercultural dialogue between the diverse communities of Novi Sad and its region; c) developing public spaces (also by turning some of the numerous parking lots in the city centre back into squares); d) using industrial heritage for cultural purposes (also through the “Culture Station” project); e) exploring new business models in the cultural sector (also through collaboration with tourism bodies, crowdfunding and partnerships with the private sector) (*ibid.*).

The programme uses a bridge as a symbol of rebuilding and renewal – a process similar to the restoration of the city’s bridges after the NATO bombing in 1999.

In December 2020, by formal decision of the European Parliament and Council, Novi Sad postponed the title year to 2022 from 2021 due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2020).

Kaunas (<https://kaunas2022.eu/en/>), a UNESCO Creative City of Design since 2015 (and as such a member of the worldwide Creative Cities Network), is located in the middle of Lithuania, about 2 hours’ drive from the capital, Vilnius. The Kaunas 2022 team aims to use the ECoC process as a lab to create a unifying identity for the city.

Among the goals listed in the bid book are preservation and protection of the city’s modernist buildings and inclusion into the UNESCO World Heritage List (Kaunas was placed on the tentative list in 2017), cultural infrastructure enhancements (both new developments and re-purposing), strengthening the education sector, and increasing civic engagement and participation (Kaunas City Municipality, 2017, pp. 8–9, pp. 11–13). A narrative for the programme is being developed around the Mystical Beast, an embodiment of “all cultural and identity conflicts and contradictions” (Ibid, p.8). There is a strong programme focus on community involvement, capacity building in the cultural sector, and youth empowerment, also through climate change projects prepared predominantly by young people (European Commission, 2020, p. 8). The ECoC aims to overcome pessimism and nostalgia by finding ways forward and making Kaunas an attractive place for young people. The Kaunas team

began to deliver the cultural programme as soon as they were confirmed as host city, with up to eight large-scale cultural projects rolled out annually since then (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

Overall, the areas of activity of Kaunas 2022 most affected by COVID-19 are: motivation of the team, funding, delivery of the cultural programme and communications (*ibid*).

The city of Elefsina (<https://www.2023elefsis.eu/>), only 20 km away from Athens, is known for its industrial activities and ancient history, including the famous Eleusinian Mysteries (initiation rituals held every year for many centuries in Ancient Greece, for the cult of Demeter and Persephone, at the Panhellenic Sanctuary of Elefsina).

Greece has been a member of the EU since 1981. However, following the Greek debt crisis (which began in 2009), the country experienced defaults and lost economic and political stability. Some of the goals in the bid book aim at contributing to address Greece's image problems resulting from the effects of the crisis. The goals of the ECoC listed in the bid book include: breaking the stereotype of Elefsina as an industrial city (local); presenting the image of productive Greece (European); sustainable development – a transition to a new model of economic growth. Elefsina is presented as an ideal place to explore the challenges that Europe is facing (Eleusis 2021, 2016, pp.2–4, 7, 9–17).

In December 2020, by formal decision of the European Parliament and Council, Eleusis' title year was postponed from 2021 to 2023 (European Commission, 2020). In February 2021, the new artistic vision and identity “2023 ΕΛΕΥΣΙΣ – Mysteries of Transition” was presented by newly appointed General Artistic Director Michail Marmarinos. The three key themes of the new artistic programme are People/ Society, Environment and Work.

Overall, the areas of work of the Eleusis 2023 team most affected by COVID-19 are: artistic programme and outreach, co-operation with international partners, funding and infrastructure projects (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

Tartu (<https://tartu2024.ee/en>), a UNESCO City of Literature, will hold the title in 2024. Tartu also plans to apply to host the Manifesta 15 European Nomadic Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2024 (European Commission, 2020). Tartu is the capital of Southern Estonia and the country's second largest city. Estonia has been a member of the EU since 2004 with a period of fast economic growth between 2000–2007 and fast recovery from 2010 after the 2008 financial crisis.

The key theme of the ECoC programme is “Arts of Survival”, with a special focus on ecology. The theme recalls the protests and local authority opposition to the national government proposal in 2018 to stop the construction of a pulp mill on the Emajõgi River. The protests eventually led to the suspension of the project (Vahtla, 2018). The goals in the bid book prioritise education and research. In the second monitoring report by the European Commission, the ECoC team stated that the pandemic had not significantly affected the long-term plans of Tartu 2024 (European Commission, 2020). The development phase for the cultural programme is underway to reflect three key directions of the programme itself suggested in the bid book: “Tartu with Earth: Ecology Before Economy”, “Tartu with Humanity: Forward to the Roots”, “Tartu with Europe: Greater Smaller Cities”. At the end of 2021, the projects successfully completing the development phase will be included in the official Tartu 2024 cultural programme. Tartu 2024 is explicitly interested in the legacy of the ECoC title, seeking to secure lasting ecological, social and cultural impact on the city, the region and Europe beyond 2024 (Tartu City Government Department of Culture, 2019).

The team named the following areas as those most affected by the pandemic: cultural programme development, international co-operation and day-to-day team communications (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021).

4.2 Emerging issues and opportunities

4.2.1 Financial impact

The public funding and sponsorship revenue streams were affected due to the shifting government priorities and the pandemic's hit to national, regional and local economies. Developing partnerships with international cultural institutions may present an opportunity in terms of project funding.

4.2.2 Public funding

Novi Sad faced a 50% budget cut in 2021, due to reallocation of funding at the national level to finance the construction of COVID-19 hospitals (Dinulović, 2021). The funding cuts slowed down the development of the construction projects (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021).

In Kaunas, the 2020 programme had no budget cuts, but the funds were temporarily “frozen” (European Commission, 2020). In 2021, municipal priorities changed, so a budget reduction is possible for the next year. To mitigate the risk, the foundation is trying to decrease costs (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021). Some impactful activities do not necessarily require large budgets. The International Happiness Day 2021 in Kaunas and Lithuania was delivered at a cost of about €5,000 (Ibid).

The Eleusis 2023 ECoC team, facing a financial crisis due to the decrease in tourism and in participation at events, identifies the impacts of COVID-19 on funding among the most pressing issues (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

While Tartu has national and municipal funding secured for 2021, they had to delay their fundraising campaign due to the pandemic (European Commission, 2020, p. 5).

4.2.3 Sponsorship

With economies severely affected, securing cash sponsorship – a difficult challenge in some countries even before the pandemic – became even harder. The fundraising efforts of Kaunas 2022 are focused on businesses that remain operational, such as shopping malls (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021). The team of Eleusis 2023, who identifies finance as one of the areas most impacted by the pandemic, states the sponsorship stopped being a reliable way of funding due to the consequences of COVID-19 and subsequent changes in potential sponsors' financial positions and priorities (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

4.2.4 Partnerships

Another possible source of funding mentioned by the Kaunas team is partnerships with international cultural institutions like Aliance Française and the Goethe Institut. This

channel is used strategically by Kaunas 2022, with the aim of securing major funding to support flagship projects (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

Eleusis 2023 has also closely collaborated with embassies, international cultural institutes, and national cultural institutions and foundations. During the pandemic, they have strengthened their collaboration with European cities' networks such as the ECoC Family, Culture Next Network, Pilot Cities Network, and many others. Eleusis has also applied for European project funding through the Creative Europe programme and the Perform Europe programme targeted at sustainable touring and digital distribution in the performing arts scene. (Personal communication, 2021)

4.2.5 Relationships with municipal and national authorities

All interviewees were understandably careful in wording their responses to the question about their relationships with au local and national authorities. How open can the ECoCs be when talking about issues in their interactions with their main funders? The example from Kaunas suggests that some ECoCs may experience more pressure depending on the attitude of local government towards the arts (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

In Novi Sad, there seems to be an understanding between the Foundation and the authorities at all levels, despite the budget cut (referred to by the foundation as the “logical consequence of the pandemic”). The team feel they have support as a project of national importance. A practical example is that of the streaming of the cultural events through regional and national media partners (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021). The support to Kaunas at a national level was also strong (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021), due to the Lithuanian Government's perceived importance of Kaunas 2022 for the image of Lithuania.

The Eleusis 2023 team note that the change in the timeline for the ECoC put pressure on relationships due to new negotiations and “bureaucratic procedures of public procurement” (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

4.2.6 Interaction with the local cultural sectors

The impact of the pandemic was devastating for the independent cultural sector in Novi Sad, but public institutions continued as usual (Dinulovic, 2021). Novi Sad saw its role as being finding ways to overcome apathy and deal with uncertainty. As part of its legacy plans the ECoC team set up Cultural Stations – a new model of organisation in Novi Sad and Serbia, contributing to the decentralisation of cultural activities. The programmes and events presented at cultural venues since the start of the pandemic were important for the sector and audiences alike (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021). The ECoC has been focused on mitigating the economic impact of COVID-19 on the local arts scene (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021). Four open calls were launched starting at the end of 2020, resulting in the largest ever investment of funds to support the local cultural sector, with 60% going towards independent, non-institutional organisations (Novi Sad 2021, 2021).

At the other extreme is Tartu, where support programmes from the national government provided significant help for the entire cultural sector. The plan is for the artistic ideas presented in the bid book to go through a development process or incubation peri-

od to develop the projects for the cultural programme. The Tartu team emphasised that preparations for 2024 could support the local cultural sector in the coming years (European Commission, 2020). Capacity building is another area where the ECoC's support is important, for example, through the Kultuurikompass forum.

In Kaunas, the region lacks a vibrant independent cultural sector (European Commission, 2020). The ECoC is pushing local organisations to be more ambitious and diverse. This approach to capacity building creates tensions, as some of the organisations would prefer to maintain the status quo. There is also a concern that apart from partnering with the ECoC, there are no other funding opportunities (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

Eleusis 2023 ECoC is working on establishing a “Capacity Building and Innovation Center” as a central component of its programme (Eleusis 2023 ECoC, 2021). The pandemic and the response to it (as gauged by the variety and overwhelming number of submissions to the latest open call) prompted the ECoC team to revise their initial ideas, goals and role, and use their position to create opportunities for expression and creation (*ibid*).

4.2.7 International co-operation

International co-operation plays a critical role in ECoC programmes and has been severely impacted by the pandemic in all four cities.

Novi Sad had to revise all of their co-operative programmes and the team noted this as the area where the pandemic affected preparations the most ((Foundation Novi Sad 2021 European Capital of Culture, 2021). Postponing the title year to 2022 shifted the dates, so that they were no longer suitable for some of the existing partners. Novi Sad will now hold the title during the same year as Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg) and Kaunas (Lithuania), rather than Timișoara (Romania) and Elefsina (Greece), as planned before the pandemic.

On the other hand, no international projects were cancelled because of the pandemic in Kaunas, with a hope to continue co-operation in 2021 as planned. As the cultural sector worldwide experienced rearrangements and delays, the postponements as part of Kaunas 2022 are in sync with the situations their partners are experiencing. The team are having open and detailed conversations with partners to mitigate the uncertainty and resolve possible issues together (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

Eleusis 2023 ECoC, while closely co-operating with international partners, reports the closure of borders as a significant impact with uncertainty about its effects on the future (Eleusis 2023 ECoC, 2021). The impact was strong in Tartu, where the COVID-19 situation prevented projects from establishing contacts for international co-operation (European Commission, 2020, p. 6). This has been noted as one of the areas affected the most by COVID-19 as it is much harder to share ideas and reflections and build trust digitally (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021).

4.2.8 Cultural programme

The priorities and goals included in the bid books remained unchanged in all four ECoCs (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021; Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021; Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021; Eleusis 2023 ECoC, 2021). However, all four experienced cancellations and postponements due to COVID-related restrictions. The planning for the

large-scale events was identified as a seriously affected area by the ECoC teams of Eleusis and Kaunas.

Artists invented and delivered new projects, in particular in public spaces, taking into account new constraints such as social distancing. The examples initiated by the ECoCs include the use of urban routes (the “Car-Free Avenue” initiative in Tartu), public spaces (the “Culture to the Courtyards” and “International Day of Happiness” projects in Kaunas), the use of digital tools (all, including a data sharing app in Kaunas), and a new identity and artistic vision (Eleusis 2023). Kaunas anticipates that the “Culture to the Courtyards” projects that bring artists and local residents together will have a long legacy. Seeing how similar projects have been developed in other cities is motivating for the team (European Commission, 2020, p. 7). A similar positive effect can be observed in the case of the Car-Free Avenue project, which Tartu sees as a test for other large and small pilot activities, encouraging the cultural sector to experiment with pilot projects while preparing and developing plans for a wider roll-out of the idea (European Commission, 2020, p. 5).

In Kaunas, the restrictions in audience sizes and the rise of hybrid models of presentation led to programming smaller events over longer runs to make it possible for a larger number of audiences to attend (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021). Given its location in a city with a tradition of design, the Kaunas ECoC organised a workshop to develop an “adaptive capsule”, a structure for public and non-public spaces that allows for safe communication between people. The project’s initiator underlined a need for outdoor activities and for social interaction to “take place safely in familiar ways” (Kaunas 2022, 2020). A different approach to programming seemed to emerge, with a more holistic way to think about projects, with less focus on audience target numbers, as this was outside of anyone’s control. Instead, the priority was to create something very special (Butnoriūtė, 2021). The opening ceremony is now planned to take place on 22nd January 2022, and Kaunas is prepared to do a broadcasted ceremony as a plan B (personal communication, 2021).

The Eleusis 2023 representatives observe that the cultural programme was significantly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. With the programme based on the use of public spaces, participation, and active citizen involvement, the Eleusis 2023 officials comment on the general distrust of audiences in participating even in small-scale cultural activities. Additionally, many projects planned around artists coming to the city to create site-specific works are facing uncertainty due to the travel restrictions (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

The specific impacts of COVID-19 on programmes targeting marginalised social groups seemed uncertain at this stage for Novi Sad, Kaunas and Tartu. Eleusis 2023 remarked that during the pandemic the self-isolation of marginalised groups increased, making engagement and building trust more difficult. The ECoC team suggested using online content and digital channels of outreach to try to overcome this (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

4.2.9 Planning and organising

In addition to the cultural programmes, the pandemic caused a need for adaptations across all areas of operation and a continuing process of risk management. The planning process had to contend with ever-changing limitations and restrictions imposed on cultural operations. Novi Sad prepared a “Plan B” (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021). Tartu stated that the pandemic is now ingrained in risk assessments (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021). Uncertainty affected everyday communications on planning and

delivery with partners (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021), while remote working slowed down the team’s interactions and complicated relationships with stakeholders (*ibid.*).

ECoCs that have more time to manoeuvre saw the pandemic in the period leading to the title year as an opportunity to experiment. Kaunas viewed the time between the start of the pandemic and the beginning of the title year as an opportunity to plan, learn from others, test things and come up with the smartest and most creative ways to deliver the programme (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021). Such optimistic attitude is balanced with the intensity of work required by this approach. Eleusis 2023 referred to 2020 as the “incubation era” in the interview, and also as a time to test the small scale artistic programme “Ordinary Mysteries” (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

Novi Sad and Eleusis also faced the challenge of the change of the title year. Novi Sad is focusing on delivering and marketing the programme. The postponement by one year put the event out of sight of the general public (Dinulović, 2021). Eleusis 2023 is redesigning project delivery. Such redesigning covered many aspects: “urgent response to the needs of the cultural field, community involvement and social distance, infrastructure as well as use of public space in response to physical distance, need for different indicators...that were missing in the monitoring procedure, new aspects in contracting, planning of digital content transfer for all the projects, different financial model” (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

The Kaunas interviewee adds to the mix a need to look for “adaptable contractors” who are able to operate in an agile way depending on the circumstances – for example, by approaching marketing agencies that managed the messaging about postponement of the Tokyo Olympic Games (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

4.2.10 ECoC teams

The Kaunas 2022 team faced a significant decrease in motivation and pressure on the team to deliver the programme while managing the expectations of all stakeholders (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

Tartu identifies the requirement to work remotely and via digital means and the discomfort associated with it among the main problems created by COVID-19 (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021).

4.2.11 Digitalisation

All four ECoCs offered online events and activities. However, the potential of digitalisation is not straightforward. The cultural sector was pushed towards creating digital content, but there was no guarantee that digitally fatigued audiences would engage. Novi Sad, while acknowledging the increase in digital cultural offering and a subsequent increase in the number of viewers as a result of the pandemic, emphasised that this could not be compared to live cultural experiences. At the same time, Novi Sad considered streaming and broadcasting to be opportunities, and specifically mentioned the expanded audience reach and co-operation at national, regional, and city levels to streamed events such as the opening of the Kaleidoscope of Culture or an open-air opera to the whole country or region. Novi Sad also remarked that artists are now considering digital approaches more and more, which

could lead to new artistic experiments (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021).

Kaunas are trying to avoid online means as much as possible, replacing the digital with hybrid presentation and creating new forms to express their ideas, e.g., street art objects commissioned for the City Telling Festival (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021). The digital channels create opportunities for wider reach and increased viewings. However, the reach could be limiting for certain audience segments (i.e., the older generation who are not familiar or comfortable with technology or those without access to the internet). For the stakeholders and partners a new tool is being developed by Kaunas 2022 to share data in a participatory way (European Commission, 2020, p. 6)

Like other ECoCs, Eleusis 2023 did not consider online content as an equal substitute for live artistic projects and also remarked that the costs associated with high quality digital presentation are higher than those of the original projects. Digital presentation also created a new layer for negotiations with artists and the need for cultural rights clearing. Digital literacy is mentioned as a concern in relation to the participatory programmes (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

Despite the increased online activity on social media and on its website (European Commission, 2020, p.5), Tartu commented that their concept was developed “not as a digital European Capital of Culture”. The goal was bringing people together and digital methods alone would not suffice. The team would continue working towards having real visitors and anticipated that this would be possible given that the title year is further away (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021).

4.2.12 Economic regeneration

The possible impacts and responses varied based on the year when a city holds the title, and on expectations about tourism and audience attendance patterns. There is a shift of focus to the tourists travelling locally and from neighbouring countries.

Novi Sad mentioned the uncertainty of the ECoC’s tourism potential and thus support from the municipality as their current concerns. The marketing has been re-orientated to promote local and regional tourism as a response to the uncertainty about the borders opening (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 - European Capital of Culture, 2021).

Kaunas acknowledged that tourism target numbers are uncertain (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021). The focus shifts to tourists from neighbouring countries and alternatives to flying (European Commission, 2020, p.8). Surprisingly, and despite support at national level, the National Tourist Agency was not interested in promoting Kaunas 2022 ECoC as a tourist attraction (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

The Tartu team did not yet have alternative plans as it was unclear what the situation might be in 2024. However, the focus will likely to be on attracting the tourists from Scandinavia, the Baltics, Germany, and Russia (European Commission, 2020, p.8). The team continues to develop its nightlife strategy that was started during the bidding phase (*ibid.*). There was an interest from ECoCs in exploring other approaches to economic regeneration through culture and innovation, but it was unclear whether the pandemic accelerated this move towards alternative strategies. Novi Sad joined the o-city project (<https://ocity.webs.upv.es/>), a platform for cities to promote a creative economy based on the crossover of creativity, innovation, and technology. While it was aligned with the concept of cultural

and heritage tourism, it also enabled the exploration of alternative models of economic regeneration and re-thinking the economy in terms of sustainability (Novi Sad 2021, 2021).

In line with their modernist programme, Kaunas 2022 was active in the New European Bauhaus movement, aimed at sustainability and accessibility, and based on the involvement of the creativity and innovation sectors (Kaunas 2022, 2021). Eleusis 2023 ECoC (having sustainable development and transition to a new model of economic growth based on the tertiary and cultural sectors as one of their key goals), aimed to consolidate capacity building actions and innovation strands to establish the Capacity Building and Innovation Center. This was the central component of the programme that the ECoC wished to open up to a broader range of users (Eleusis 2023 ECoC, 2021).

4.2.13 Culture and well-being

In Novi Sad, in the city of Elefsina, and Kaunas, concerns were expressed around emotional well-being alongside physical health. All four cities took part in the “Europe at home” project (<https://www.europeathome.eu/cities.html>), a reflection by artists on this moment in history.

The open call launched by Novi Sad 2021 last year, only a few months after the pandemic had started, received proposals for arts projects that dealt with pandemic-related topics, and the expectation was that artistic responses to the current health crisis will only increase (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021).

The first event of Kaunas 2022 in 2021 raised the topic of emotional health. The foundation is also working on the idea of “Emotional Reflector”, a public art legacy object that would remind audiences about the exceptional time experienced by living through the COVID pandemic (Butnoriūtė, interview, 2021).

In addition to the “Ordinary Mysteries” programme, inspired by the effects of the pandemic, well-being was one of the important criteria for Eleusis 2023’s international open call launched in February 2021 (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

Tartu also expects an increase in the number of artistic projects related to the pandemic (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021).

4.2.14 Volunteers

The recent volunteer open calls and requirements in Kaunas and Tartu are mostly focused on tasks related to the organisation and hosting of events. However, the volunteer organisation, Novi Sad Voluntary Services, created as a joint platform by the ECoC and Novi Sad – European Youth Capital 2019 offers an example of high-level civic engagement where voluntary services extend beyond support for the event. The ECoC’s volunteers contributed significantly to the fight against pandemic. They delivered medicines and groceries to the elderly and to people from low socio-economic groups and helped in setting up temporary COVID hospitals (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021). The volunteers’ work was celebrated through the October Novi Sad award, and it was decided by voting to use the prize money to plant trees. The Volunteering Oasis represents the “values of volunteering – advocacy for peace, freedom, solidarity and humanity” (Novi Sad 2022, 31.03.2021).

Eleusis 2023 ECoC explained that shortly after the pandemic the co-ordinators of the ECoC volunteer programme started actively networking to support each other. This led to the creation of an informal network to share information and tools between parties involved in cultural volunteering. Eleusis 2023 ECoC also referred to the difficulties of establishing a volunteering programme because of its legal status: they suggested that this is a common problem for ECoCs. In their case the pandemic provided extra time to create a volunteering plan that will be launched in 2021 (Eleusis 2023 EcoC, 2021).

4.2.15 Hindsight

The section provides some insights on what the ECoCs would have done differently if the preparation of the bid book started after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Novi Sad emphasised flexibility – planning the programmes so they can be changed easily if required. One example is structuring projects as platforms, “with clear goals and target groups”, but more flexible activities and timelines (Foundation Novi Sad 2021 – European Capital of Culture, 2021).

Eleusis 2023 ECoC, with the chance to re-design its approach, focused among other things on reorganising the structure of the company to ensure more flexibility and administrative agility, and on reviewing the infrastructural demands based on the needs of the artistic plans, and on the requirements for a sustainable legacy, social distancing and digitalisation.

Tartu responded that as the focus of bid books was on what were current themes, certain topics would be given more space, such as “mental and physical health aspects of isolation and the everpresent feeling of threat; the virtualisation of public and private life; the cultural sector’s quest to re-establish audience connections and stable income; the loss of cross-border cultural ties, tourism, trade and travel” (Tartu 2024 Foundation, 2021). Additionally, Tartu 2024 suggested that the design of many support processes needed to be re-thought, including “contents on impacts, monitoring and evaluation; operating and capital investment budgets; organisation and team structure; communication and marketing” (*ibid.*).

4.3 Emerging trends and Analyses

4.3.1 The COVID-19 crisis as a catalyst

The importance of physical and mental health, income security, and social interaction came to the forefront. Health and economic concerns took priority over culture, not only on political agendas, but also for the ECoCs’ audiences. There are numerous examples of inventiveness, resourcefulness, and mutual support between ECoCs. On the other hand, it seems that the pandemic revealed certain weaknesses in the overall ECoC structure, e.g., the reliance on public funding and targets and expectations associated with this, the length of

the project and its sheer size. The impact of COVID-19 on ECoCs was also determined by other factors, such as the state of the country’s economy and the support packages available, the stage of planning/preparation an ECoC was at when the pandemic began, and the focus of the cultural programme.

4.3.2 Innovation and creativity

- a. Hybrid Models. The limitations of digitalisation are becoming more apparent and it is getting clearer to which areas of work it can be successfully applied and where it is detrimental to the desired outcome. As a result, hybrid models have become the focus of experimentation, to combine the best of analogue and digital. While this type of hybrid events/activities can have significant artistic and community impacts, they are usually small (due to restrictions) and require a different approach to programming, e.g., longer sequences of smaller events rather than one large-scale live event.
- b. Ways to ensure safe social interaction This ranges from entirely new approaches and devices, like the “adaptive capsule” in Kaunas, to the work of the Cultural Stations in Novi Sad to decentralise culture, to the extensive use of public spaces and outdoor activities (a method have used across all four ECoC cases in this chapter).

4.3.3 Financing model and decision-making agility

The ECoC financial model has limited possibility to adapt to situations like the one brought by the COVID-19 crisis. The ECoCs’ budgets (being mostly comprised of municipal, regional, and national funding) are vulnerable to possible cuts driven by changing priorities. The cuts in public funding at various levels resulted in strategies for budget re-allocation. Using public funding also creates certain constraints as the necessary procurement procedures slow down decision making. Many ECoC events are free of charge, so the reduced number of expected visitors would not necessarily have a strong impact on the budget. However, there is a risk that Government funding could be lowered due to the inability to meet targets which are important for economic regeneration driven by tourism and the night-time economy. The COVID-19 impact on the economy also affected the choice of sponsors and approaches to fundraising.

4.3.4 A more holistic approach to programming and goal setting

With the change to available forms of presentation (e.g., no large-scale public events and uncertainty about tourism), there seems to be a shift of focus from hitting targets to doing the best it is possible to do under the circumstances. The cultural policy rhetoric emphasising the positive impacts of art and culture on so many areas of life and using measurable items to provide a statistical underpinning (i.e., the number of tourists attending a cultural festival) often fails to focus on the qualitative aspects, that are, of course, much harder to measure. The COVID-19 pandemic, in a way, alleviated the pressure to achieve the targets, and thus freed up creative energy to deliver programmes that are not primarily focused on boosting tourism and regenerating the economy. However, as a large part of the ECoC’s funding is coming from local and municipal budgets that treat it as investment, this may become an issue in the future. The focus on the ECoC’s effects and legacies other than economic regeneration though boosting tourism might become more mainstream.

4.3.5 Emotional health and well-being of ECoC teams

The question of mental health issues associated with the pandemic and the restrictions and uncertainties it caused is an important consideration for ECoC teams. The loss of motivation and momentum, the constant adaptations, as well as pressures to deliver at all costs, shaped the environment in which ECoC teams operated during the pandemic. While the high intensity of work is not unusual for the cultural field in general, the expectations of many stakeholders associated with ECoC activities are especially high. Careful, mindful leadership would become critical in the post-COVID-19 world to mitigate the negative impacts of constant anxiety about change, uncertainty, and the high intensity of professional engagement.

4.3.6 The drawbacks of remote working

This affected partnership building and the communications within the teams themselves. It is an interesting point to consider within the context of the complex and long-term project with a strong emphasis on communications, co-operation, and interaction.

4.4 Further questions and discussion

Change in audiences' attitudes post-COVID-19. How long will the effects on emotional and mental health last and what would this mean for tourism and cultural consumption? Will audiences rediscover the confidence to attend live cultural events?

The ECoC as an investment. With ECoC budgets being mostly comprised of municipal and national funds, how would the reasoning for such investment by national and local governments change, if tourism and the night-time economy are no longer reliable pathways to urban economic regeneration? The combination of art, research and technology is mentioned more and more often. What would be the role of ECoCs in future models of economic regeneration?

Culture as sustainability. Could this be an answer to the previous question? An interviewee from Tartu mentioned that bid books usually reflect what is on people's minds locally and globally. Interestingly, even before the COVID-19 crisis, the themes raised in the bid books of both Eleusis 2023 and Tartu included community/people, environment/ecology, and the sustainable economy. Based on the framework by Dessein et al. (2015), can the ECoC, as a large-scale project with a capacity to experiment, research, and create, reinforce the role of culture as a backbone of civil society and the foundation for social, economic, and ecological sustainability? If so, what kind of target-setting and evaluation might be appropriate to demonstrate the potential of the ECoC as investment? Would the focus lean more towards qualitative analysis and long-term research in this case, putting more emphasis on the legacy programmes and thus ensuring the longevity of the ECoC effects?

What is digitalisation actually good for? In some cases, the ECoCs give contradictory answers about the benefits of digitalisation. This could be due to the fact that the shift towards an online dimension has been forced by the pandemic, rather than prompted by natural curiosity or experimentation. It seems that the use of digital tools is more beneficial for: 1) artistic creativity restricted by social distancing; 2) marketing and dissemination.

Additional research on the most suitable ways of using digital technology in the cultural field could be helpful to provide future guidance to ECoCs and cultural organisations.

CHAPTER 5:

Case studies of the three Finnish cities competing for the ECoC 2026 title – Oulu, Tampere and Savonlinna

5.1 Context

In 2026, one Slovak city and one Finnish city will share the title of European Capital of Culture (ECoC). In Finland, three cities and their wider regions competed for the title: Oulu, Tampere and Savonlinna. The three cities and regions, although located only some hundreds of kilometres from one another, are quite different, with different histories, environments, economies, traditions, and cultural services, and with different expectations from the ECoC year.

When the first COVID-19-related restrictions were introduced in Finland in March 2020, the deadline for submitting the applications was less than two months away. Oulu, Tampere and Savonlinna had to finalise their applications in an unprecedented situation of shutdowns, remote working, and uncertainty. Needless to say, the pandemic affected the processes and plans of the applicant cities in many ways.

Because of travel restrictions, the ECoC expert panel's pre-selection visit was held online for the first time ever. The pre-selection took place in June 2020, and all three cities proceeded to the second and final bidding stage. The pre-selection panel took into consideration the "extraordinary context" in which the cities had had to finalise their bid books, with the lockdown challenging their abilities to engage citizens and local stakeholders and to develop European and international partnerships. It was expected that all three candidates would strengthen these areas of work and revise and confirm their budgets for the final bid books by April 2021. Moreover, it was recommended that the three candidate cities plan for a long-lasting impact of the pandemic on the cultural sector (European Commission, 2020).

In June 2021 the European expert panel chose Oulu as the ECoC for 2026. This case study aims to shed light on the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Finnish ECoC candidates' bidding processes, plans and programmes. First, the COVID-19 situation and its consequences in the Finnish context will be discussed, with special attention given to its impacts on the cultural field. Secondly, the three candidate cities and regions will be introduced and the main points of their ECoC plans will be discussed. Thirdly, emerging opportunities and challenges will be explored, based mainly on interviews with the ECoC organisations. Finally, potential future challenges caused by the pandemic for the three ECoC cities will be identified and analysed, and suggestions for future research will be presented.

Information has been collected from websites, reports, news articles and the ECoC candidates' bid books. Furthermore, to get an understanding of the experiences of the ECoC organisations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following representatives of the ECoC teams: Oulu2026 Project Director Piia Rantala-Korhonen; Oulu2026

Programme Director and Cultural Director of the City of Oulu Samu Forsblom; Saimaa Phenomenon Co-ordinator Anu-Anette Varho; Saimaa Phenomenon Project Manager for research and evaluation Katja Pasanen, from the University of Eastern Finland; Culture Director of the City of Savonlinna Outi Rantasuo; and Tampere 26 Project Director Perttu Pesä.

This chapter attempts to explore some emerging issues and opportunities, as well as future challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic for the Finnish ECoC candidates. The study was carried out before the final designation of Oulu as the 2026 ECoC, and at a time when many pandemic-related restrictions were still in place. It is difficult to make predictions about the evolution of the pandemic. Only later, when the true impact of the COVID-19 crisis are better understood, it will be possible to make a more precise analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on the ECoC project. However, it was valuable to conduct these case studies at the time of the pandemic, because time could alter the ECoC organisations' memories related to the experiences, thoughts, feelings and actions caused by the pandemic.

5.1.1 Impacts of the pandemic on employment and on municipal finances

As a result of the €3 billion COVID-19 support from the State, Finnish municipal economies were strengthened in 2020. In total, the combined budgets of all municipalities and joint municipal authorities showed a surplus of €1.7 billion, and the overall economic situation of municipalities improved from 2019. However, the pandemic is expected to have an impact on municipal finances for years to come, and the long-term losses might be greater than the support received from central government (Kuntaliitto, 2021).

Another reason for the amount of surplus in municipal economies was that many services were closed for part of the year because of the pandemic, which decreased the amount of expenditure on services (e.g., Lindholm, 2021).

Many Finnish municipalities were already experiencing economic difficulties before the pandemic. The Finnish ECoC candidates are all facing some big structural challenges, and the pandemic just adds to the list of economic problems. Savonlinna, for example, is facing high social and healthcare costs. Savonlinna's province, South Savo, has the oldest population in the whole of Finland (City of Savonlinna, 2021).

Oulu has its struggles too, due to rising social security costs and a rapidly ageing population. As a result of a new savings and investment plan, the city has taken more loans and decided to rise the municipal tax. Oulu now has the highest tax rate among Finland's largest cities (City of Oulu, 2021).

Tampere had a better starting point before the pandemic than Savonlinna and Oulu and ended 2020 with most surplus out of the three case study cities. However, Tampere has its financial challenges, too, and more so as a consequence of the pandemic. The private, public and third sectors have all faced economic difficulties as a result of COVID-19, unemployment has grown, the travel and event industries are in crisis and there is a growing need for social services. The amount of borrowing Tampere is taking on is growing, and the pandemic-related economic challenges are expected to continue (City of Tampere, 2021).

For individuals, economic worries and the need for income and food support have increased during the pandemic. Private spending was reduced by almost 5%, affecting most

of all the transport, hotel and restaurant industries, as well as the arts, entertainment and recreation services (Punakallio, 2021).

5.1.2 Impacts of the pandemic on the cultural sector

The cultural sector in Finland has been deeply affected by the pandemic. Municipal cultural services have had a relative stable and secure position; the restrictions, shutdowns and cancelling of events caused operational challenges but economically it has mainly meant savings for municipalities. The third and private sectors, on the other hand, have been hit hard.

Organising events was severely restricted since March 2020, freelancers were out of work and largely without support systems, arts organisations had to keep their doors closed or restrict their audience numbers to a minimum, and a large number of artists and cultural sector professionals were without work opportunities. Jobs were lost, as a large number of cultural workers were laid off. During the second quarter of 2020 alone, the number of unemployed arts field professionals grew by 4,000, or 57%. In euros, the losses are significant: freelancers' income losses are estimated to be around €200 million; the whole events industry is estimated to have suffered losses worth €1.9 billion; and the losses of the live music sector were worth €360 million, which is equal to 80% of the sector's 2019 turnover. Furthermore, decision-making slowed down and funding decisions were delayed (Kinnunen, 2020; Nihtinen, 2020; Tapahtumateollisuus ry, 2021b; Weckström, 2020; Wirén et al., 2021).

The pandemic is widely challenging the financial sustainability of cultural organisations in the private and third sectors, and many are at risk of closure as a result of the crisis. Similarly, artists may be forced to find jobs or to retrain to try to gain employment in other sectors.

Columnist Janne Saarikivi (2021) made an interesting comparison: to compensate for COVID-19-related losses, the State supported the national airline Finnair with €200,000 per employee, while the cultural field was supported with €1,082 per employee, even though the cultural field employs 17 times more people than the airline. The general feeling in the cultural and events sectors is that they have not received equal treatment, compared to other fields. For example, restaurants, bars and casinos are allowed to let more people in than theatres, museums or cinemas (e.g., Mattila, 2021; Tapahtumateollisuus ry, 2021c).

Besides the direct economic impacts of the pandemic, the cultural sector was also faced with the challenge of decreasing lottery funds that have traditionally been an important source of financial support for the arts in Finland. This has been an important topic in culture funding discussion in recent years, and the corona crisis made the issue even more urgent and pressing. As a result of the pandemic, the lottery funds have decreased by approximately €400 million since 2019. Even though the State partly compensates for these losses, the total funding for arts, sports, science and youth work – all fields heavily reliant on lottery funds – will be reduced by €41 million in 2022 and €54 million in 2023. For arts and culture, this would mean a €17.5 million budget cut in 2022 and a €23 million reduction the following year. The coming years thus look difficult for the crisis-struck cultural sector.

A report by Kulturanalys Norden showed that Finland supported the cultural sector less than other Nordic countries during the crisis: “The figures for comparing cultural policy support are uncertain, but Finland stands out with relatively low support, measured as both euros per capita, per employed in the cultural sector and as a percentage of

GDP” (Kulturanalys Norden, 2021). According to the writer of the report, interviewed for an article in *Helsingin Sanomat* newspaper (Airola, 2021), the difference could be explained by the slowness of decision-making in Finland: most of the support for culture was not granted by national government until a year after the pandemic began. However, in the same newspaper article, Maria Hirvi-Ijäs from the Centre for Cultural Policy Research Cupore notes that comparisons between different Nordic countries are difficult to make because of statistical and historical differences, and suggests a critical examination of the report (Airola, 2021).

5.1.3 Responses from the cultural sector

Many cultural organisations, associations, and unions, such as Kultury, LiveFin, Tapahtumateollisuus ry, Forum Artis and Taku, have come out demanding funding and support for the sector but compensation from central government has been insufficient.

In the of spring 2020, the cultural and events industries founded an association called Tapahtumateollisuus ry to do advocacy work. They launched, for example, a *#tyotkielletty* (“work forbidden”) campaign with the aim of collecting financial aid from individuals and organisations for cultural and events workers who were left without work and income as a result of the pandemic. On some occasions, the restrictions and responses of the regional state administrative agencies have been suspected to be illegal. In March 2021, for instance, Tapahtumateollisuus ry filed a complaint to the Attorney General, claiming that the treatment of the events industry violated the Finnish constitution (Tapahtumateollisuus ry, 2021a).

In December 2020, a Facebook group called Tapahtuma-imperiumin vastaisku (‘Counterattack of the events empire’) was created for arts, culture and events professionals. Discussion about the situation has been active within the group, and demonstrations and other collaborative actions have been planned and organised.

5.2. Introductions to the Finnish Candidate Cities for ECoC 2026

5.2.1 Oulu2026

Oulu, the capital of Northern Finland and the fifth biggest city in the country, is located on the west coast of Finland about 600km. north of Helsinki. The city (although accessible by airplane, train, buses and cars) is remotely located and far from the hub formed by Helsinki, Tampere and Turku. Oulu is home to one of the biggest universities in Finland, as well as to two universities of applied sciences. The average age of Ouluians is 39 years, but the population is rapidly ageing, as the number of new-borns is decreasing while the number of elderly people is growing. Social contrasts are big, too: 8% of Ouluians use 80% of the city’s social and health services’ resources, and youth unemployment is a big problem in the region (City of Oulu, 2021; Oulu2026, 2021).

Oulu started their ECoC bid in 2017, before the other candidate cities. Oulu2026 applied for the ECoC title as a wider Oulu2026 region, together with 32 other cities and municipalities from three different provinces. The Oulu2026 region is home to about 500,000 inhabitants. The region spreads out from the west coast all the way to the Russian border in the east. The pre-selection bid book stated that a shared history and traffic network –

both related to the old tar route – connect the cities in the region. However, there are a lot of internal differences within the area: Oulu is the only big, growing city in the region, while many of the smaller municipalities are losing population (Oulu2026, n.d.; Rantala-Korhonen et al., 2020).

The city of Oulu merged with four other municipalities in 2013, doubling its geographical and increasing its population by about 47,000 people. The merger did not bring about an instant sense of togetherness but rather a competitive atmosphere without a collective spirit. The old municipal divisions still exist. The Oulu2026 project Oulu is trying to make an even wider region work together toward a common goal and engage citizens from a very varied area. This will not be an easy task (Rantala-Korhonen et al., 2020).

The first inhabitants of Oulu were Sámi people who arrived in the area around 3,000 BC. Sámi culture still has an important place in the city today, and the Giellagas Institute at the local university is the only place in Finland where it is possible to study Sámi language and culture as a main subject (Rantala-Korhonen et al., 2020).

The University of Oulu has a high quality engineering faculty and Nokia's telecommunication lab is based in the city. Oulu became a hub for new technologies in the 1990s and even now Oulu is known as a technology and student city rather than a cultural hub – this is one of the things Oulu aims to change with their ECoC title (Rantala-Korhonen et al., 2020).

Oulu invested in important cultural institutions in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the City Theatre and City Library, two brutalist buildings built by the sea, Oulu Art School, Oulu Art Museum and the Madetoja Music Centre. Oulu is home to many cultural institutions and events. The wider Oulu 2026 region has 76 libraries, 15 cinemas, 60 annual festivals, 4 state-funded and 82 local museums, 8 professional and 36 amateur theatres and 15 cinemas. Oulu is also home to some peculiar cultural initiatives, such as the Air Guitar World Championships, the Screaming Men's Choir and a Polar Bear Pitching event, where participants pitch their idea from a hole in the ice (Rantala-Korhonen et al., 2020).

Oulu is characterised by strong political divisions: hate speech and cyber-bullying are recognised problems (Rantala-Korhonen et al., 2020). In the spring of 2021, for example, swastikas were painted on the facades of the offices of the Left Alliance and the Greens. These can be seen as signs of a hardened political climate (Annala, 2021; Pikkarainen et al., 2021).

The main theme of Oulu's bid is 'cultural climate change'. It refers to "reconnecting with the world...and creating a new sense of togetherness". The final bid book emphasised that the pandemic has made cultural climate change an even more relevant theme – not only in Oulu but also in Europe and around the world. The aim of Oulu2026 is to shift the emphasis of Oulu from a functional hard-tech city to a city full of soul, possibilities and culture (Oulu2026, 2021).

The ECoC bid of Oulu was closely connected to the city's cultural strategy, which aims to strengthen a sense of place and identity, build a sense of community and well-being and enhance creativity (City of Oulu, 2020; Oulu2026, 2021).

The cultural and artistic programme of Oulu2026 is divided into three themes: Wild City, Cool Contrasts and Brave Hinterland. The Wild City theme aims to build a city with a wild and creative spirit, with special attention given to young people's dreams; the Cool Contrasts programme aspires to challenge and connect the strong contrasts in the region; and finally, Brave Hinterland wants to highlight the edges of Europe, far away from the core and with extreme climate conditions. Each theme has its own flagship project and a

fourth, separate flagship project called Peace Machine aims to counteract polarisation, discrimination and hate speech and promote dialogue and common humanity (Oulu2026, 2021).

As recommended by the pre-selection panel's evaluation report (European Commission, 2020), Oulu strengthened the European dimension of their bid for the final stage. COVID-19 is identified as a unifying issue across Europe and the world, which strengthened Oulu's reconnection theme. Oulu aims to reconnect people through culture (Oulu2026, 2021).

Another dimension that was clearly strengthened for the final bid book is that of digitalisation. Oulu2026 aims to combine art and technology in new ways and make the city a "European leader in humanising technology to reconnect people" (Oulu2026, 2021).

The estimate of the total operating expenditure for the ECoC is €50 million, which has not changed from the pre-selection phase (Oulu2026, 2021; Rantala-Korhonen et al., 2020).

5.2.2 Saimaa Phenomenon 2026

Water areas make up 38% of Savonlinna's total surface area. With a population of approximately 33,000 Savonlinna was clearly the smallest of the three Finnish candidate cities. Savonlinna is also located near the Russian border, only about 200 km from Saint Petersburg.

Savonlinna applied for the ECoC title as part of the wider Saimaa region, consisting of 53 cities and municipalities from four provinces. The total population of the region is 674,408. The capital cities of the four provinces, Kuopio, Mikkeli, Joensuu, Lappeenranta and Savonlinna would each in turn be nominated Saimaa Capital of Culture from 2022 until 2026. The year would have culminated in the Capital of Culture year of Savonlinna in 2026. It is interesting to note in Saimaa's bid that it was the larger cities that support the smallest city in the region, Savonlinna, as a candidate for the ECoC (Kaasinen et al., 2020; Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021).

Like Oulu and Tampere, Savonlinna also has a rapidly ageing population. While people aged 15–64 make up 56% of the total population, the amount of people over 65 clearly outnumber the younger population of under 14-year-olds. Only 12% of Savonlinna's population are 14 or under, while 32% are over 65. Young people are moving away, and the overall population is declining. Other challenges include regional diversification and a growing urbanisation trend, increasing loneliness and exclusion, high unemployment numbers, and lack of skills (Kaasinen et al., 2020; Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021).

Savonlinna is widely known as the home of the annual Savonlinna Opera Festival. Other important cultural events of the region include Ilosaarirock festival in Joensuu, Kuopio Dance Festival, a steamship event on Lake Saimaa and Savonlinna international nature film festival. Traditions, history and nature have an important role in the cultural offer of Savonlinna. One of the best-known sites is the Olavinlinna castle in Savonlinna, built in the 15th century. Folk music, Kalevala traditions, summer cottage culture and steamships are all important parts of the region's culture. Savonlinna also has the oldest upper secondary school in the Nordic countries specialising in the arts.

Savonlinna and the Saimaa region applied for the ECoC designation to increase the vitality and well-being of Savonlinna and of the whole Finnish Lakeland; to attract new residents, support the creative industries, improve the employment rate, enhance cultural accessibility, and promote international cultural offerings and collaborations. The ECoC

was seen as an opportunity for the entire Saimaa region to become identified as a European cultural city and region (Kaasinen et al., 2020; Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021).

The pre-selection panel noted that the theme “Saimaa Phenomenon” was quite generic and needed further elaboration (European Commission, 2020). For the final bid book, the theme was complemented with the concept of ‘Art of Living’, referring to the locals’ ‘good life’ skills, authenticity and relationship with the nature. Saimaa emphasises its clean nature, water areas, peace and sustainability in the bid book. The space and nature resources are highlighted, and, as a consequence of the pandemic, the small size of the Saimaa urban areas was presented as a strength. Another important theme was the role of Saimaa in developing cross-border cultural collaboration between the EU and Russia (Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021).

The three themes of Saimaa’s bid were Power of Water, Connecting Bridges and Eastern Joy. They were already present in the first bid book and were further developed for the final version. The first one, Power of Water, refers to the ways in which the water element is present in the planned cultural programme. Lake Saimaa and the surrounding nature have a strong role in the bid, and Saimaa plans, for example, to organise arts activities floating on water and other activities that strengthen people’s relationship with the environment and combine arts and culture with traditions and nature. The Connecting Bridges theme contains programmes that aim to bring different kinds of people together, facilitate new networks and co-operation, create connections between cultural institutions around the region, and build international links. The Eastern Joy theme stems from the reputation that Karelians and Savonians have as welcoming, jovial, open, and hospitable people. Saimaa wants to bring the exuberance and joy to all Europeans. Plans included creating more harmony between Karelians and Savonians, emphasising the uniqueness and originality of their culture, traditions, history and lifestyles, and a programme focussing on the culinary traditions of the region (Kaasinen et al., 2020; Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021).

The Saimaa team emphasises the opportunities the pandemic has brought about for them. For example, as remote working has gained more popularity during the pandemic, people might be more interested in moving to smaller towns or rural areas. The so-called ‘dweller phenomenon’ may also lead to people who reside in bigger cities wanting to spend more time in their countryside homes and cottages. Furthermore, the pandemic is predicted to make culture a more important driver of economy. (Kaasinen et al., 2020; Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021)

The estimated expenditure of Savonlinna’s ECoC project was €28 million, significantly lower than that of the other two candidate cities (Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021).

5.2.3 Tampere Region 2026

Tampere, located by two lakes in inland Finland in the province of Pirkanmaa, is the third biggest city in Finland with a population of over 238,000. Tampere is a very well-connected city and easily reachable from all over the country. The second biggest university in Finland is located in Tampere, and the city also has one university of applied sciences (Tampere, 2021).

Like Oulu, Tampere is struggling with an ageing population. Tampere has a low average birth rate and not enough work-based international immigration. Furthermore, young

people, especially younger women, are leaving the city, while long-term unemployed people are moving in (Kovalainen and Kokkonen, 2020).

Tampere is known as a city with a long working-class history. In the Civil War that started soon after Finland's independence in 1917, Tampere was one of most important cities of the so-called Red Finland, or the Finnish Socialist Workers' Republic. Some of the bloodiest battles of the civil war were fought in Tampere (Tampere, 2021).

Nowadays, Tampere is considered to be one of the most advanced cities in northern Europe. Tampere was one of the first cities in the world to demand equal rights for women. Tampere policy makers have also worked hard to keep the city's environment clean. Currently Tampere is going through some structural changes, with plans to invest over 2 billion euros in construction and development projects. In their ECoC bid, Tampere emphasises the need to work for equality, a sense of community and sustainability in the midst of local and global challenges (Kovalainen and Kokkonen, 2020; Tampere26, 2021).

Tampere applied for the ECoC designation with the Pirkanmaa region. The challenges of urbanisation are a reality in the region: while bigger cities are rapidly growing, rural and peripheral areas suffer from depopulation and weakening economies. In order to make the region more equal, Tampere 2026 aimed to intensify co-operation in the region and to develop a sustainable brand of Pirkanmaa through shared natural and industrial heritage, climate innovations, culture and the arts (Kovalainen and Kokkonen, 2020; Tampere26, 2021).

Tampere has an active and lively cultural scene. Traditional cultural institutions, such as the Lenin Museum, Tampere Workers' House and Tampere Workers' Theatre are still active today. Sara Hildén Art Museum is internationally recognised. Both the city and the region of Tampere have lively performing arts scenes and many cultural events throughout the year. Tampere also hosts the annual Music and Media conference, which gathers professionals from around Finland and the rest of Europe to discuss current issues in these sectors. Furthermore, Tampere is known as the sauna capital of the world and as a place with a vibrant urban culture. The gaming culture and skateboarding have gained a lot of recognition lately (Kannisto, 2021; Kovalainen and Kokkonen, 2020; Tampere26, 2021).

The main aims of Tampere's bid were cultural sustainability, social and cultural equality, and sustainable urban and regional development. Tampere aimed to promote equality through cultural sustainability at local, regional and European levels. The bid was structured around four main programme lines which all addressed equality from different points of view. The first was (R)evolutions, which aimed to harness the arts and culture to explore historical developments and the present state of equality in Tampere and in Europe. The theme Equally Yours celebrated artistic and cultural diversity. Thirdly, Village Hopping addressed regional equality and promoted access to high-quality culture in different regions. Finally, the Wild Card theme explored the ecological dimension of equality (Kovalainen and Kokkonen, 2020; Tampere26, 2021).

The pre-selection panel encouraged Tampere to include the European dimension more firmly in the programme, and to be more specific about aspects of the plans (European Commission, 2020). In the final version of the bid book Tampere strengthened the role of digitalisation, developed the equality theme in general and in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and expanded the European dimension (Tampere26, 2021).

The planned overall expenditure by Tampere's ECoC programme €53.18 million (Kovalainen and Kokkonen, 2020; Tampere26, 2021).

5.3. Emerging issues and opportunities

As has already been discussed, the pandemic forced Oulu, Tampere, and Saimaa to reconsider many aspects of their processes and plans. While the impact of the pandemic on the bidding phase was important and some long-term consequences were expected – mainly in terms of accelerating digitalisation – the cities seemed to see the pandemic as something which would pass, without directly affecting their plans for 2026.

This section of the chapter discusses the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Finnish ECoC candidates' bidding phase processes and future. It also aims to analyse future opportunities and challenges brought about by the pandemic.

5.3.1 Teamwork and internal working patterns

All three cities confirmed that the pandemic impacted their ways of working. As remote working was recommended all over Finland during the worst phases of the pandemic, the ECoC organisations also moved to work from home. Meetings were held online, and teamwork was organised by using digital tools.

Remote working was something the cities had to adjust to, and although they had been able to make it work, there had been some challenges. Saimaa, for example, felt that working from home had been generally difficult, especially during the phase when schools were closed and children were educated from home (Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021). Tampere felt that leading a team remotely was challenging; it was difficult to really understand how people were doing when you would only see them through a computer screen (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

As can be expected, creative teamwork was challenging too. Oulu noted that creative writing is usually a collaborative process of people working physically in the same place (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021). Tampere also pointed out that a lot of the spontaneous, creative exchange of thoughts was missing because of remote working conditions (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

All three teams also had periods during the pandemic when they were able to work physically in the same place, which was seen to be important. Tampere, for example, had recruited a new team after the first bidding phase, and felt that being able to work together in the same place for a period during autumn 2020 was crucial for the team's dynamics (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, the teams also identified some positive implications of the pandemic for the internal work. Saimaa and Oulu noted that the team got used to digital tools, and Oulu also felt that overall remote working had worked well (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021; Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021). Tampere noted that their team had been very dynamic even when working remotely and that their strengths had been highlighted during the pandemic (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

Oulu and Tampere began their bidding processes earlier than Saimaa. The processes of Oulu and Tampere were thus further ahead and some team members had already worked together before the pandemic hit. The Cultural Director of the City of Oulu and Programme Director of Oulu2026, Samu Forsblom, notes that when the pandemic hit Finland, Oulu was already quite far with their bidding process and specific teams were already working on different projects, which made the shift to the online environment less challenging

(Forsblom, personal communication, April 8, 2021). Organising the internal teamwork was probably a lot more challenging for Saimaa, which started the process significantly later.

5.3.2 Collaborations and partnerships

Another obvious impact of the pandemic was that the ability to travel was reduced or ceased completely. All three candidate cities mentioned the cancelling of trips and travelling as one of the most significant impacts of the corona crisis. All three cities agreed that the pandemic situation had in some ways actually made regional and international collaboration easier, more effective and more flexible, as most meetings were organised online instead of in person. The online working environment thus saved a lot of time and money. The positive environmental impact was also recognised. Indeed, the pandemic has shown that with the digital and online tools available, even international collaboration does not require constant travelling. That could mean new, more environmentally sustainable work and collaboration procedures for future ECoCs even after the pandemic.

Representatives from Oulu, Savonlinna and Tampere all said that the pandemic situation had made it easier to build wider networks and partnerships regionally and locally. Tampere was able to form over 100 European partnerships for their ECoC programme, which would not have been possible under normal circumstances (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

Oulu felt that the pandemic had made different partners more equal. Previously, partners with whom the team had met in person had become of major importance compared to others with whom contact had only been made via phone or email but now that all meetings are online, everyone is met on equal terms. Oulu also noted that international collaboration had become a daily practice during the pandemic, which it previously was not (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021).

However, meeting people online is not the same as meeting in person, and a relationship of trust can be harder to build. Oulu acknowledged that even though partnership work had been easier, a more profound level of connection had been missing (*ibid.*) and that partnerships could have developed more fully if travelling had been allowed (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021).

Saimaa shared the feeling that even though building international partnerships had been easier, the more profound dimension of collaboration had been missing because of cancelled in person meetings and site visits. Surprisingly perhaps, Saimaa noted that the online meetings had felt more authentic and relaxed than meetings in person, as the usual formalities and rituals had been missing (Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

Oulu also noted that while remote working had functioned relatively well for the organisation, the impact had been more negative for artists, as the online environment is not ideal for understanding artistic practices or building peer networks. Oulu had a project that aimed at taking artists and creative professionals on peer networking trips to other European countries but most of the trips were cancelled because of the COVID-19 situation (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021).

5.3.3 Cultural programmes

Surprisingly, none of the three ECoC candidate cities identified any concrete changes in their programme caused by the pandemic. On the contrary, all three seemed to think that their initial programmes had become stronger because of the pandemic. The pandemic was not seen then as something that would directly affect their plans for 2026.

Oulu noted that the pandemic has made the organisation plan their programme to be “foolproof”, i.e., realisable no matter what happens (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021). Saimaa had also carried out a risk assessment and created plans A, B and C as a consequence of the pandemic (Pasanen, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis had not led to the creation of new artistic projects inspired by the pandemic. The Programme Director of Tampere (personal communication, 30th April 2021), however, noted that there probably will be some later on. Given the impacts of the pandemic on artistic work, the cultural sector and everyday life, it is surprising that there were no artistic projects on this theme in the ECoC candidates’ programmes. A possible explanation is the severe impact the crisis has had on artists and cultural professionals, which might have led to a lack of energy and motivation to plan and prepare programme for the year 2026. Moreover, perhaps the growing disappointment and sense of unfairness in the independent cultural sector about what they perceived as inadequate support from central government during the crisis did not motivate artists to cooperate with big, European and largely state-funded mega events.

All three ECoC candidates shared worries about the state of distress of the cultural sector. They all acknowledged that artists, cultural professionals and third and private sector organisations had been severely hit by the pandemic and related restrictions and had their work and income opportunities restricted for over a year.

5.3.4 Participatory activities and engagement

Participatory activities were seen to be the most affected area in the ECoC bidding process. Oulu and Tampere had been able to carry out an important part of their participatory activities before the pandemic but once restrictions came into place, many had to be cancelled or organised digitally. Saimaa was not as far with their participatory activities and their engagement plans were thus more affected by the corona crisis.

Oulu had organised virtual participatory events but noted that they were not the same as the tours and live events they had planned. One of their plans had been to do a board game tour, taking the participatory Oulu2026 board game to different places, including libraries, schools, and shopping centres, to play and discuss with people about their hopes for the ECoC year. The tour had to be cancelled because of the pandemic (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021).

Saimaa had been able to organise a participatory tour before the pandemic hit, which was seen to be an important foundation for engaging and motivating local people (Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

Tampere noted that the pandemic had specifically impacted participatory activities targeted to non-typical audiences and participants. People who are not naturally interested in cultural activities or the ECoC project will not accidentally find the information about

the project – or if they do, they might just ignore it. Face-to-face encounters, according to Tampere, are vital in reaching such groups, but they were impossible to organise during the pandemic. (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

All three cities noted that the pandemic had made it impossible to work with children and the elderly. Oulu had not been able to visit either schools or day centres, but they had found a way of involving children at a local art school (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021). Saimaa had also not been able to involve schools or day care centres, so they had focused their participatory efforts on upper secondary and university schools, with whom workshops, and a capacity building programme had been organised (Pasanen, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

In the first application round, Saimaa gathered together the children's cultural centres and actors of Eastern Finland. Based on that collaboration, programme content was developed. Saimaa had also been involved in a national network for children's culture, whose proposal was taken account of in programme planning (Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

All three candidates planned to deliver at a later stage the cancelled participation programme and to involve more people in the process when the pandemic situation allowed.

The pandemic had not led to a rethinking of strategies and services more targeted to marginalised or disadvantaged social groups in any of the three candidate cities. All three emphasised that from the beginning they had attempted to make the voices of different social groups heard and that the disadvantaged groups had been considered. They also emphasised that there was no special programme for disadvantaged groups, as the whole ECoC project was for everyone. There were, however, some targeted activities for specific groups. Saimaa, for example, had planned an outsider art programme and some content addressing people with mental health problems. Oulu noted that they would take culture to where the people are, and that at least 50% of the cultural programme would take place outside cultural institutions and in everyday settings (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021). Oulu also believed that digitalisation would help in reaching out to disadvantaged groups (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 8, 2021). Tampere (Pesä, 30th April 2021) emphasised that community and equality were the starting points of their whole programme. They had, for example, organised over 40 events all over the Pirkanmaa region, and collected ideas through workshops from different municipalities and social groups.

However, during the pandemic, organising such activities was difficult, and it is therefore possible that the voices of the more disadvantaged social groups went unheard. The pandemic hit hardest those who were already in a vulnerable position. Therefore, the rethinking of targeted strategies to reach disadvantaged social groups might be needed.

5.3.5 Volunteer programmes

Rather surprisingly, volunteer programmes had not been central to the three cities' bidding processes. The pandemic is probably a significant reason for the lack of volunteer programmes, but their absence was still surprising, especially considering the weight given to volunteer engagement in the ECoC guidelines (e.g., European Commission, 2014, pp. 18–19).

Oulu has a Cultural Ambassadors model, where anyone can sign up. The model has been operating throughout the pandemic and will continue throughout the ECoC project

(Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021). In their bid book, Oulu recognised volunteers as the “key facilitators of Cultural Climate Change” and their goal is to have 20,000 people participating as volunteers or ambassadors for Oulu2026. (Oulu2026, 2021, p. 77).

Saimaa did not have a volunteer programme during the bidding phase. They felt that they did not have the resources for it and that there would not have been anything for the volunteers to do, due to the pandemic’s restrictions (Pasanen and Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021). However, in the Saimaa bid book volunteer work had a strong presence and they aimed to train at least 1,000 volunteers to participate in different ways in the ECoC project (Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021). As early as the first bidding phase, people also had the opportunity to share ideas and suggestions, or to point out “phenomenal” people or actors in the area (personal communication, 2021).

In Tampere, people were invited to share their ideas, but no volunteer programme was in place during the bidding phase (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021). A volunteer programme, however, was included in the final Tampere bid book, with a range of projects and different ways for volunteers to take part,

5.3.6 Digitalisation

All three cities agreed that the pandemic had pushed them to take a big digital leap. They had all adopted new digital tools and working habits, and the pandemic had opened their eyes to the opportunities brought about by digitalisation.

Oulu has two main projects in their ECoC programme exploring the potential of the digital: TechArt, which aims to create bridges between art and technology, and DigicCult, which aims to make cultural and nature destinations available for everyone through a digital platform (Oulu2026, 2021, p. 7). Both projects were already part of Oulu’s plans before the pandemic but, according to the Oulu2026 team, their role became even stronger (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021; Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021).

Samu Forsblom was very optimistic about the opportunity’s digitalisation might open for arts and culture. He believed streaming would continue to grow and that hybrid productions would be the future for cultural events. He noted that digital platforms should not only be seen as platforms but also as content in themselves. Forsblom also saw increasing digitalisation as an opportunity to improve the accessibility of culture, not only in Finland but also across national borders, and to make cultural programmes more climate friendly. Moreover, he saw great potential in creating new income streams for culture through digital and virtual solutions. He further emphasised that Oulu, as an old tech city, could take a leading role in the promotion of solutions and approaches combining art and technology in Europe and in building Europe-wide art and tech networks (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 8, 2021).

As a central part of their bid, Saimaa Phenomenon planned a digital platform that would make the ECoC programme digitally available and accessible and allow tourists to create their own “Saimaa phenomenon” (Saimaa Phenomenon, 2021, p. 55). The Saimaa team, like Oulu, noted that the idea of the digital platform was already strong before the pandemic, but its role was reinforced as a consequence of the COVID-19 situation (Pasanen and Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021). They also noted that the importance

of VR and AR experiences grew in their bid. While previously AR and VR solutions were considered as merely add-ons to the live experience, they were now increasingly seen as valuable (Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

The Tampere official noted that the pandemic had made it necessary to study how to make best use of digital opportunities. Tampere saw big opportunities in digitalisation in terms of reaching people anywhere in Europe. They saw digitalisation as having great potential in improving accessibility: people from different parts of Europe could take part even if they did not have the opportunity to travel (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

There were, however, some challenges related to increasing digitalisation. Samu Forsblom pointed out that there was still a lot of work to be done to humanise technology, to enable emotional and social experiences on digital platforms. He was, however, optimistic that this could be achieved through digital means. He also noted that a revenue logic still needs to be developed, as people are not as prepared to pay for digital cultural services as they are for traditional, live content (personal communication, 8th April 2021).

The question of digital divides and accessibility was acknowledged by all three candidate cities, but no solutions were in place as yet. It was noted that certain groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities and people without digital tools or abilities, did not have equal opportunities to participate in digital cultural services. Perttu Pesä (personal communication, 30th April 2021) also noted that there are internal differences within the ECoC region: young people are mostly well prepared and able to use digital tools and devices, but older generations in the rural areas of Pirkanmaa might not have the same level of digital familiarity. At the same time, digitalisation was also seen an opportunity to improve accessibility for different groups of people.

5.3.7 Cultural well-being

Oulu, Saimaa and Tampere all confirmed that cultural well-being had an important role in their well-being strategies. The role had been significant already before the COVID-19 outbreak and it had gained even more strength as a consequence of the pandemic. However, the pandemic had not led to any concrete changes in the candidates' cultural well-being strategies.

Piia Rantala-Korhonen (personal communication, 25th March 2021) believed that the importance of arts and culture for people's well-being and mental health had become more widely understood. The city of Oulu had just finalised a cultural well-being strategy (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021). Forsblom (*ibid.*) pointed out that the cultural well-being plans of the City of Oulu had been difficult to take forward during the pandemic. He emphasised that encounters are what create cultural well-being, and there are no digital solutions to replace them yet.

For Saimaa, cultural well-being was seen as an everyday thing, consisting of encounters and ordinary, everyday activities. As a member of the National Cultural Well-being Network, they had invested in cultural well-being already before the pandemic, but worries about increasing problems, such as mental illness, caused by the pandemic had made this dimension even stronger in their bid (Pasanen and Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

For Tampere, well-being had been one of their ECoC project's core themes alongside equality, sustainability, and accessibility since the beginning. The pandemic had strengthened these themes and made them feel even more important, but as in Oulu and Tampere, no concrete changes or additions had been made to the ECoC programme (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

5.3.8 Cultural strategies and culture-led urban regeneration

The three cities' cultural strategies were not altered in response to the pandemic. In the case of Oulu, the cultural strategy and the ECoC programme are closely connected and aim to solve the same urban development challenges. Samu Forsblom (personal communication, 8th April 2021) noted that the cultural strategy of the City of Oulu was constructed before the pandemic, but that, if it was created now, digitality would have a more important role.

Savonlinna did not have a cultural strategy at all before the ECoC project began. A cultural strategy was developed for the ECoC bid, as this is required from all applicant cities. Varho (personal communication, 2021) pointed out that the developed strategy was also a collaboration strategy for Eastern Finland. Besides Savonlinna – who in late 2021 is in the process of implementing the strategy – the other cities are also committed to prepare their cultural strategies and plans (Varho, personal communication, 2021). The strategy was created before the pandemic, and it had not been changed. Varho (personal communication, 31st March 2021) noted that the strategy was built as an enabling plan, rather than as a binding document. It is for this reason that she felt that changes were not needed, as the strategy already had the flexibility to enable it to respond to the pandemic situation. Cultural Director Outi Rantasuo (personal communication, 4th May 2021), on the other hand, noted that reconsidering the cultural strategy might be needed at some point, but only after some time had passed would it be possible to look back and see what changes may be necessary.

Pesä pointed out that 15 out of the 20 municipalities in the Tampere Region 2026 did not have a cultural strategy. This challenge had been acknowledged already before the pandemic. The pandemic had not led to changes in the existing cultural strategies, but the themes of equality and sense of community had grown stronger in the region. Pesä also emphasised that cultural strategies must recognise and respect the differences between neighbourhoods, towns, and villages in the region, and see them as an enriching force and a source of mutual learning (personal communication, 30th April 2021).

All three ECoC candidates placed strong emphasis on regional development and cultural planning in their programmes, but the pandemic had not led to a rethinking of their culture-led urban regeneration strategies.

5.3.9 Political support

There was a shared feeling among representatives from the three candidate cities that local political support for the ECoC project had strengthened during the pandemic.

The Oulu team noted that the ECoC had become the number one project for the city and local politicians. In late March 2021, the City Council had unanimously supported the bid. Rantala-Korhonen felt that the pandemic had led to an increased understanding among decision-makers about the importance of the ECoC project and its potential to make the region stronger in the future. Forsblom pointed out that getting political support for the

ECoC was not too difficult since the City Council had some budget surplus after 2020. He also thought that the potential impact of the ECoC on regional economy was well understood among local politicians and that political support for the project was on safe ground, especially with the postponement of the municipal elections until after the ECoC designation (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021; Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021).

The Saimaa team also felt that political decision-makers had understood the regional importance of the project. Some smaller municipalities had not been able to give extra funding, but that had been because of the current financial situation and not because of lack of support. The Cultural Director confirmed that political support for the project was strong and was not affected by the pandemic. Opposing voices had been a small minority. There were only some worries about the financial situation of the municipalities, which might become more difficult as a consequence of the pandemic (Pasanen and Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021; Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021).

Perttu Pesä (Tampere) also observed that political support for the ECoC had strengthened during the pandemic. The political field unitedly supported the project and the ECoC was seen as an important regional development project for the whole Tampere region across political party lines (personal communication, 30th April 2021).

5.3.10 National and European authorities: collaboration and support

The timing for the interviews in May 2021 before the final decision about the ECoC 2026 was perhaps challenging, as the candidates' answers to the question about collaboration with national authorities seemed quite careful.

Representatives from all three cities pointed out that there had been a delay with funding decisions because of the pandemic, and that national government support for the ECoC had not yet been decided, which caused some planning challenges.

Pesä felt that the pandemic had taken attention away from everything else and that the ECoC project did not seem to interest the Ministry of Education and Culture at all. He thought that perhaps the distant locations of Pirkanmaa, Oulu and Saimaa were not interesting enough for national decision-makers (personal communication, 30th April 2021). Moreover, Pesä was disappointed with how the public authorities had worked during the pandemic: all decision-making power had been given to medical scientists and to the regional state administrative agencies' lawyers. That, according to Pesä, had led to all communication about restrictions and possibilities to organise anything being ambiguous and unclear, which had made planning and organising cultural programmes even more challenging, not only for the ECoC but for the whole cultural sector in Finland (personal communication, 30th April 2021).

In terms of support from the EU, the candidates felt that there had not really been additional aid available. Oulu (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021) noted that the process is very sensitive, and all communication must happen formally and be equal to all candidates, and there has therefore not been much contact between the evaluation panel's meetings. Only one meeting had been held in August 2020 between the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the European Commission and the three candidate cities, where questions could be asked. Besides that, and newsletters from the Ministry, no support had been received.

The Saimaa team was surprised that the bidding process schedule had not been altered more in the light of the significant challenges caused by the pandemic. They mentioned EU webinars and seminars on the impact of the pandemic on the creative sector and possible future developments, but no other support had been offered. However, Saimaa also felt that the evaluation panel's decision to take into account the pandemic situation in the pre-selection phase could be considered as a form of support; the panel decided to allow all three candidates to the final round (Pasanen and Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

Tampere, on the other hand, felt that even though the EU has not really been present during the bidding stage, they probably would have got help had they needed it. But Tampere had not particularly needed or expected anything from the EU during this stage (Pesä, personal communication, 30th April 2021).

5.3.11 Plan B

Officials from all three candidate cities asserted that the work done during the bidding phase would not go to waste, and that as much as possible of the programme would be realised even if they did not win the ECoC title. The pandemic had not affected the Plan B strategies.

Piia Rantala-Korhonen emphasised that there was a strong will to continue building on the partnerships created and to carry out the planned projects, some of which had already been started. She explained that if Oulu did not win the title, different funding sources, such as Creative Europe, would be explored (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021). Samu Forsblom confirmed that parts of the programme would be implemented in any case, especially the TechArt project. However, the budget for the Plan B was still uncertain and he believed that negotiations with the City Council about it could be challenging if the bid was lost (personal communication, 8th April 2021)

Likewise in Saimaa the plan was to realise the Saimaa Phenomenon no matter what happens. The Saimaa Phenomenon was seen to be a larger thing than just the ECoC designation. Varho said that the "Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa" project, for example, would be carried out no matter what. However, it was acknowledged that the amount of funding would be a lot less without the ECoC title, and therefore the scale would be a lot smaller. As in Oulu, different funding sources and opportunities would be explored (Pasanen and Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021; Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021).

Perttu Pesä emphasised that cultural strategies would be created for the municipalities who do not have one yet no matter what happened with the ECoC bid. He noted that the budget for Plan B was still unclear, but part of the programme would be realised, and developing a sense of community would remain as a central goal. Pesä highlighted the importance and value of bidding and confirmed that the work done would not be lost even if Tampere did not win. He also noted that when Tampere lost the ECoC 2011 bid, they still realised about 90% of their planned cultural programme (personal communication, 30th April 2021).

5.3.12 Positive consequences of the pandemic

The positive consequences of the pandemic, as experienced by the ECoC candidates, were strictly related to the acceleration of digitalisation.

Rantala-Korhonen (personal communication, 25th March 2021) noted that the closure of travel and the shift to online working, while also having some negative consequences, had helped to create a tighter network of international contacts for Oulu. Online working and meetings had also saved them a lot of time and made their work more environmentally sustainable. Forsblom (personal communication, 8th April 2021) highlighted the opportunities of digitalisation to create new opportunities for artists, improve accessibility, create new revenue streams and bring about innovation.

Varho felt that although remote working had been somewhat challenging, it had been effective and saved a lot of time. She felt that without the digital shift it would have been impossible to find enough time to meet with so many different people from different regions. The pandemic situation had also opened the Saimaa team's eyes to the possibilities of digital tools to create new opportunities for audiences, such as visiting places that could not be reached physically. Saimaa also felt that the regional planning dimension had become stronger and that overall, their programme idea and structure had strengthened. Pasanen and Varho added that the pandemic had given them a chance to catch up with Oulu and Tampere, who had begun their bidding processes earlier than Saimaa. Moreover, they noted that the pandemic had highlighted the strengths of Saimaa and turned some weaknesses into assets. For example, the small size of the cities and municipalities in the region was now seen as a strength (Pasanen and Varho, personal communication, 31st March 2021).

For Tampere, Pesä (personal communication, 30th April 2021) felt that the digital leap would bring many new opportunities, such as being able to sell tickets to wider audiences regardless of their physical location. Pesä also pointed out that crises tend to make people think in new ways, and he therefore believed that the pandemic would have a wider positive impact.

5.3.13 Travel and tourism

The pandemic affected the three areas in different ways. In Oulu, proximity tourism grew and in the summer of 2020 the number of Norwegian visitors also increased. Overnight stays in the city reduced by one fourth in 2020. The number of air travellers decreased from over 1 million to about 313,000 but compared to cities like Tampere and Turku, the tourism sector of Oulu was less affected. Oulu2026 also had conversations with their Swedish partners about developing travel in the region on both sides of the border. A planned railway line from Oulu to Haparanda was seen as a big opportunity to develop travel and tourism across the border (Rantala-Korhonen, personal communication, 25th March 2021).

The travel and tourism sector of Savonlinna was less affected than in most other cities. The number of domestic visitors increased in 2020, and especially the summer was very lively in the city and region. Small hotels, summer houses and nature tourism were very popular tourist attractions. However, the number of international and business visitors decreased, and some losses were made in the travel sector during the usually busy Christmas season in December 2020-January 2021. The bid book emphasised the potential of Saimaa to further develop nature tourism in the region, and that was also mentioned

in the interviews: the whole Saimaa region had become more attractive as a tourist and holiday destination because it features many nature destinations, national parks, space, and fresh air (Pasanen, personal communication, 31st March 2021; Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021).

The travel sector of Tampere was the worst hit out of the three cities. Compared to 2019, overnight stays in 2020 decreased by 37%. The decrease was largely caused by the closure of international travel; while in 2019, two-thirds of all visitors had been foreign tourists, the majority of incomers in 2020 were domestic visitors. However, in summer 2020, Tampere was a popular destination for domestic visitors.

5.3.14 Responses from municipal cultural services

In the interviews with the Cultural Directors of Oulu and Savonlinna, it was clear that the pandemic had had a significant impact on public cultural services, at operational level. The closure of public cultural institutions during the worst phases of the pandemic led to layoffs and prevented municipal cultural services from fulfilling their missions. Both cities organised some smaller scale activities and streamed some cultural events. Both Forsblom and Rantasuo were optimistic that audiences would be hungry for culture after the pandemic-related restrictions were lifted (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021; Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021).

Citizens' cultural participation opportunities was negatively affected by the pandemic in both cities, as so many events were cancelled, and cultural institutions were closed part of the time. The potential of digital tools, as suggested earlier, was harnessed to increase participation opportunities, and improve accessibility. The Cultural Director of Oulu saw virtual and digital tools as great opportunities for public cultural services. He noted that the ability of cultural organisations to adopt the new digital tools' ways of working might divide cultural operators into winners and losers: those who are able to adapt their operations to the digital and virtual environments might be better equipped to thrive in the future than those who are not. As a good example from Oulu, Forsblom highlighted the city orchestra that had begun streaming their concerts for the public (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021). In the summer of 2020, Oulu had asked their citizens about their experiences of digital cultural contents. About half of the respondents had attended some digital cultural projects and would like to do so in the future too. Many were also prepared to pay for digital cultural contents (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021).

Rantasuo also believed that digitalisation will be an increasingly important part of city cultural services in the future. She specifically believed in the future of hybrid solutions. She noted that hybrid solutions could improve accessibility for Savonlinna, as the city area is wide, and the water areas make moving around quite time-consuming. Digital opportunities could make participation easier for many in the city. She mentioned that a project had been started with the City Library to further develop hybrid events. Although generally optimistic about the opportunities of the digital realm, Rantasuo pointed out that some cultural experiences cannot be fully replaced by online experiences: a visit to the Olavinlinna castle, she mentioned as an example, would not be the same experience virtually as it is in person (Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021). Savonlinna had not conducted a survey among its citizens, but Rantasuo felt that streamed events had been well received. However, she also noted that streaming and digital cultural services may feel tiresome for

many after staring at a computer screen at work all day. She also noted that the municipality acknowledged that not everyone had the digital devices or abilities needed, and she believed that city libraries will have an important role in helping people develop the skills needed in the increasingly digital world (Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021).

Financially, the pandemic had not caused extra challenges for the public cultural services. Both Rantasuo and Forsblom noted that municipal cultural services had saved money during the pandemic. Their operating expenses are such that ticket sales income is never enough to cover them, so when operations were not running and events were cancelled, some money was left over (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021; Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021). In fact, Forsblom wondered why public cultural services had received so much public funding during the pandemic, even though it was the private and third sectors that had been most adversely affected. He was mainly worried about the viability of creative and cultural entrepreneurs and other private sector organisations (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021).

Both Oulu and Savonlinna attempted to find ways to support the cultural sector during the pandemic. In the municipal budget of Oulu, the funding of third sector cultural organisations had already increased by about 20% since 2019, unrelated to the pandemic. No special COVID-19 funds had been distributed by the municipality, but Oulu had been flexible with grant funding. Grant recipients were allowed to change their plans and schedules, and to create digital content instead of live, and more time had been allowed for them to use the funds. Oulu highlighted a work-based approach, which aimed at “keeping the wheels turning” by creating work opportunities through streamed and other digital contents (Forsblom, personal communication, 8th April 2021).

In Savonlinna, money saved by municipal cultural services was distributed to third sector associations to whom the pandemic had caused big financial losses (Rantasuo, personal communication, 4th May 2021).

5.4. Future challenges

A brief analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on the Finnish cultural sector and studies of the three Finnish ECoC candidates reveal several future challenges for the Finnish ECoC project, which will be discussed below.

5.4.1 Deepening crisis in the cultural sector

One major challenge and one of the biggest concerns highlighted by all three candidate cities was the current and future state of the Finnish cultural sector. The public sector is relatively stable, while the third and private sectors are struggling. As a result of pandemic-related restrictions many artists and cultural professionals were without work for over a year and experienced fatigue and disappointment; cultural entrepreneurs and businesses are in deep financial and operational trouble; many freelancers have been left in a financially precarious position. On top of that, public funding for the arts and culture will face significant cuts in 2022 and 2023. The funding for the years that follow is still uncertain. If this situation continues, there is a risk that some cultural organisations will cease to exist, some professionals might be forced to find work in other sectors and the Finnish cultural sector will lose much of its richness and diversity. Another potential risk of continued cuts

in public funding is that the arts become increasingly a luxury only affordable by the more privileged sections of the population. The exact targets of the expected cuts are still uncertain, but some of them are directed at youth work, which, worryingly, may also affect young people's opportunities for cultural participation.

The crisis of the cultural sector was a major challenge for the ECoC candidate cities, whether they went forward with the ECoC 2026 designation or to carry out their Plan B. An important question to solve is how the ECoC can best support artists and the depleted cultural sector. They need to find ways to support cultural professionals and organisations and to enable participation opportunities for a wide range of citizens from different backgrounds.

The ECoC is an opportunity to enhance active participation and sense of belonging, to advance urban regeneration through culture and to strengthen the role of the arts and culture in society and in people's everyday lives. But a successful ECoC needs a healthy, lively and active independent cultural sector. In the current situation, ways to support the crisis-struck independent cultural sector are therefore urgently needed.

One example of good practice is Savonlinna's decision to distribute funds saved from public cultural services to support third sector cultural associations. Money, as well as operational and work opportunities, are what the sector now needs.

5.4.2 Remote work and partnership building

Another question to be addressed is how to develop partnerships that have been initiated and built in an online environment. In the interviews, officials from Oulu and Savonlinna point out that the online work made partnership building easier, faster, and more flexible, but a more profound level of personal communication had been missing. There was also a shared feeling among the three cities' representatives that travel habits have most probably permanently changed, at least to some extent.

The online working and collaboration environment is still very new, and it is unknown how partnerships developed online will continue to grow and if a deeper level and a sense of trust can be built without meeting in person. It seems still crucial for a large scale, Europe-wide cultural project like the ECoC to meet the partners in person and to visit partner cities to get to know each other and to reach a proper understanding of their cultural sector and climate, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities for and obstacles to collaboration.

5.4.3 Participation and engagement

The pandemic significantly challenged the three cities' participatory activities during the final bidding phase. Participatory activities during this period are highly important for successful ECoC cities. All three Finnish candidates had planned many such activities, but the pandemic situation, as shown earlier, forced them to either cancel them or organise them virtually.

Some virtual events had been organised in all three cities, but since this kind of participation is still new, they probably did not reach as many people as live events might have done. Virtual participation may also not be as motivating, as the dimension of meeting other people is missing, and some people do not have the digital devices and/or skills needed to participate. Virtual ECoC events are most likely to reach those who are already interested

in the project, as Perttu Pesä pointed out, while those who do not have a natural interest risk being left out.

The lack of bidding phase participatory activities may cause challenges in terms of citizen engagement for the Finnish ECoC 2026. Moreover, Oulu will be faced with the challenge of motivating and engaging people in the midst of post-pandemic issues, many of which may not yet be fully understood. With increased social problems, financial worries and mental health issues, motivation might be hard to find, and people might lack the physical and mental resources needed for active participation.

The pandemic is feared to have had the biggest negative impact on the social groups that were already disadvantaged before its outbreak. However, none of the three ECoC candidate cities made any concrete changes in their cultural programmes or strategies to target marginalised or disadvantaged groups. Taking live participatory activities to different neighbourhoods and public places, which had been at the core of the cities' bidding phase outreach strategies, had been impossible during the pandemic, and because of that, many people in disadvantaged social groups were probably not reached or heard. It is rather surprising that the pandemic did not lead to a rethinking of outreach and participation strategies targeted at the more disadvantaged social groups in any of the candidate cities. The social impacts of the pandemic may start unfolding in the coming years, and Oulu will most likely need to rethink some of its strategies if they want the ECoC to reach and benefit a wide range of people from different backgrounds and in different social and economic situations.

5.4.4 Volunteer programmes

As discussed earlier, none of the three cities had a proper volunteer programme during the pandemic, except for the Cultural Ambassadors scheme of Oulu2026. The bid books of all three candidate cities acknowledged the importance of an active volunteer programme, yet volunteers were not involved during the bidding phase. There is, of course, still time to involve volunteers before 2026, but a bidding phase volunteer scheme would probably have helped with overall volunteer engagement before and during the ECoC year. Early-stage volunteering opportunities could have increased the local residents' sense of ownership of the ECoC project and made it easier for Tampere and Saimaa to recruit volunteers for their Plan B activities.

5.4.5 Opportunities and risks of digitalisation

Oulu, Saimaa, and Tampere were all very optimistic about the new opportunities brought about by digitalisation. Indeed, increasing digitalisation has the potential to bring about new ways of creating and experiencing the arts, new work and income opportunities for the cultural sector, new participation opportunities, improved accessibility, and new audiences regardless of physical location. There are, however, many challenges to be considered. First, digital divides can exclude some social groups. Oulu2026 could play an important role in digital capacity building and narrowing the digital divide, but that should perhaps become an explicit part of its programme.

Secondly, as Samu Forsblom (personal communication, 8th April 2021) points out, art and tech solutions are still lacking a humanising element: the dimensions of sociability and

emotional connection are still largely missing from digital cultural activities. This should not stop ECoC projects from developing digital cultural opportunities – on the contrary, it should encourage them to be open to exploring new digital, virtual and hybrid solutions.

Thirdly, as Outi Rantasuo (personal communication, 4th May 2021) notes, increasing digitalisation in work and leisure might lead to an audience fatigue. How to make digital and virtual cultural participation opportunities motivating and energising instead of wearing or dull for people who have spent a full working day in front of a computer screen and in online meetings?

Furthermore, positive health and social impacts are currently still missing from digital and virtual cultural activities. Usually, when attending cultural events, people would walk, meet people, socialise, interact, and get a refreshing change of scenery. How can these dimensions be brought into a virtual setting? Can digital cultural activities have a similar positive impact on people's mental and physical health? These are important questions for future ECoCs to consider.

Finally, audiences are not as willing to pay for online cultural activities as they are for live ones. An important matter to consider and develop is how to guarantee that the accelerating digitalisation process will not undermine income generation opportunities for artists, other cultural professionals, and cultural organisations.

5.4.6 Increased cultural activism and distrust of policy makers

Arts, culture, and all related activities have organised, united, and activated in unprecedented ways in response to pandemic-related restrictions and funding difficulties. If Oulu 2026 and other ECoCs fail to consider the needs and claims of cultural organisations and activists, they might fail to get the support of the independent cultural sector. If the relationship between policy makers and the cultural sector is disrupted and mutual respect and trust are lost, ECoC organisations may find themselves in a tricky and contradictory position, as they will need the support of both.

CHAPTER 6:

Concluding reflections

This report has attempted to produce new knowledge and understanding about the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic on European Capitals of Culture. For this purpose, we have studied past, current and future ECoCs, as well as the three Finnish candidates for the ECoC 2026 title.

In order to better understand how the pandemic has affected and will affect ECoC cities, we conducted case studies of 13 past, present and future ECoCs. The case studies consisted of desk research, analyses of the current situation, interviews with local authority representatives and the examination of existing research about the impacts of the pandemic on cities and on the cultural sector in Europe.

All over Europe, COVID-19 had devastating impacts on the cultural and creative industries. The pandemic revealed the vulnerable nature of the independent cultural sector and freelancers in particular. The possibility to have live audiences, one of the main conditions for the sustainability of the cultural sector, was suspended or reduced. The cultural sector was thus deprived of a significant source of income. Meeting operating costs became more challenging and more than seven million jobs in the cultural and creative industries were put at risk around Europe (Montalto et al., 2020).

The findings of a report conducted in 2020 by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission are summarised in six key points. First of all, as a consequence of the pandemic, cultural jobs are particularly at risk because the cultural sector is highly fragmented and, as suggested earlier, it largely relies on a live audience. Cultural workers risk facing important losses of income because many are left outside existing social security systems. While 14% of people in employment are self-employed in the 27 EU member states, the share is much higher – on average 32% – among cultural workers (Montalto et al., 2020).

Secondly, the report observes that European medium-sized and arts-jobs intensive cities are (with some notable exceptions) especially vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic, because culture has strong links with other sectors, including tourism, gastronomy and transport, and because the job markets in such cities tend to be smaller and less diversified than in larger urban areas (Montalto et al., 2020).

Thirdly, the reduction of mobility is particularly affecting European medium-sized cities with a significant number of tourism jobs. However, the report concludes that a strong cultural and tourism infrastructure may help re-direct a city's offer towards domestic tourism and more regional and local markets (Montalto et al., 2020).

Fourthly, most national governments in EU member states responded to the crisis by supporting cultural organisations and attempting to protect cultural sector jobs. Four different types of policy measures are identified by the report: 1) payment of grants despite the fact that many cultural institutions and organisations had to cancel or postpone planned activities; 2) indirect financial support, including tax and VAT relief; 3) financial support to

compensate for income losses; 4) other forms of support, such as the provision of advisory services (Montalto et al., 2020).

In addition, at city level, complementary policy support measures were adopted. In particular, local authorities and their partner organisations began to support innovative, bottom-up initiatives to advance the development of digital culture and new event formats (Montalto et al., 2020).

Finally, the report notes that even though cities of different sizes have suggested policy responses to support the cultural and creative sectors during the pandemic, it has been mainly capital cities that have adopted important support plans. This could potentially lead to even greater regional imbalances in the distribution of cultural facilities and growing gaps between national capitals and smaller cities in some countries (Montalto et al., 2020).

The European Grouping of Societies of Authors and Composers (GESAC) commissioned EY Consulting to write a report on the state of the cultural and creative industries in Europe. The report, published in January 2021, explores the economic situation of the cultural and creative industries before the pandemic; the impact of the pandemic on such industries; and the ability of the sector to protect itself, secure future growth and emphasise its value to the European economy. The report finds that prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the economic impact of the cultural and creative industries was significant. The total turnover of the sector's core activities represented 4.4% of the EU's GDP. Since 2013, the sector's total revenues sector increased by almost 17%, and at the end of 2019, the cultural and creative industries employed over 7.6. million people in the EU. As a consequence of the pandemic, the sector lost approximately 31% of its revenues in the EU. The report identifies some key areas to support the EU's cultural and creative economy. They include the provision of public funding and building a solid legal framework to develop private investment in production and distribution (Lhermitte et al., 2021).

This report highlights the strong political support enjoyed by Finnish ECoC candidates during the pandemic. There was also increased recognition of the importance of culture by the municipality in the case of Aarhus; however, this did not translate into increased cultural funding. In some cases (Novi Sad, for example) volunteer programmes had an active role in delivering medicines and food to vulnerable people during the pandemic. This presumably helped enhance public recognition of the ECoC. In other cases, such as Matera 2019, the uncertain nature of political support at regional and city level prevented the implementation of legacy plans which had the potential of consolidating and maximising the benefits of the ECoC. However, even in the countries where there was political support, the practical needs of the cultural sector were often overlooked, due to the insufficient inclusion of representatives from the sector in decision-making about the management of the pandemic.

The case studies highlight the importance of providing financial support for the independent cultural sector (including individual artists and other freelancers), which was hit particularly severely by the pandemic and is a vital component of the cultural ecologies of European cities. Examples of good practice noted in the report include the provision of financial support for third sector organisations in Savonlinna (one of the three Finnish candidates for the 2026 ECoC title) and for individual artists and small cultural organisations by two ECoCs: Novi Sad 2022 and Eleusis 2023.

The performing arts were generally affected by the pandemic more adversely than other cultural forms, and this should be recognised by support strategies.

The increased costs of delivery of cultural events in conditions of COVID safety were more problematic for smaller cultural organisations. It was easier to weather the storm for more established cultural institutions, receiving national cultural funding (in many cases in addition to regional and local support). Municipal cultural services in some cases improved their financial position during the pandemic, due to the fact that they organised less activities and had lower running costs. With regard to business sponsorship, there were significant difficulties in attracting it in Galway and Rijeka, the two 2020 ECoCs. Their plans were disrupted by the pandemic more than in the cases of any other ECoCs.

There was a shift in most case study cities towards local, regional and national tourism. Drops in visitor numbers were more serious in cities like Matera and Tampere, which had achieved significant numbers of international visitors before the pandemic. On the other hand, some cities located in areas of natural beauty, like Savonlinna, benefitted from an increase in domestic visitors.

With regard to digitalisation, the strategies adopted by different cities varied considerably. Galway ECoC 2020, unlike Rijeka 2020, responded to the pandemic by offering a mainly digital cultural programme, in line with its plans to be a 'virtual Capital of Culture'. This ensured the delivery of the programme and allowed the Galway team to reach a numerically and geographically much larger audience, although there were some problems of engagement with the programme by local audiences (particularly older people). Officers working for the three Finnish ECoC candidates for 2026 found that working mainly digitally brought ECoC teams greater equality in partnerships with other sectors. The considerable acceleration of the trend to digitalisation, brought about by the pandemic, offered opportunities for environmental sustainability, greater accessibility by the public, reaching new audiences, strengthening regional collaborations, cost and time savings, and for cultural experimentation by artists and cultural organisations (as in the case of Novi Sad). Digital communication made it easier and cheaper for ECoC teams to maintain networks of international collaboration, but it was often impossible to organise international artistic exchanges, fully understand artistic projects (without being able to visit them) and build artists' peer networks. More profound levels of connection between people working on ECoC-related projects were difficult to build by using exclusively digital means. The report also highlights the need for a richer, more complex and 'humanised' digital cultural offer, as well as the risks of digital saturation and fatigue, which in the long run could reduce the public's interest in cultural activities. There are also continuing problems of digital exclusion, noted for example in relation to older people in rural areas in Pirkanmaa, near Tampere. There was considerable experimentation with sequences of hybrid in person/digital event, which could become the norm in future ECoC programming. However, the report notes that such events in some cases pose greater organisational challenges than large live events – due to their small scale, number and technological requirements.

Cultural participation was probably the area of work which was most negatively affected by the pandemic. It was in many cases impossible to deliver participatory cultural projects involving children and older people. The implementation of projects aimed at involving the most socially excluded groups also suffered. There was in some cases little appetite for cultural participation among more vulnerable people, due also to mental health problems and financial worries. One possible way forward to encourage participation could be the development of 'hyper-local', neighbourhood-based cultural activities, discussed in recent

cultural policy debates in Turku, and implemented in Novi Sad, through their Cultural Stations project.

Arts and health/well-being projects and policies grew in visibility and importance, partly because of the need to deal with the mental health crisis which was exacerbated by the pandemic.

The report has also highlighted good examples of artistic projects inspired by experiences of the pandemic, such as the *So Far, So Close* festival organised in 2020 by the Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, as well as projects in Leeuwarden 2018, Kaunas 2022, Eleusis 2023, Tartu 2024 and in the three Finnish candidate cities for the 2026 ECoC title.

The pandemic highlighted for ECoC teams the importance of ensuring ‘foolproof planning’ and greater built-in resilience (something which Oulu 2026 is prioritising). Many ECoC teams demonstrated considerable flexibility and adaptability. One example was the decision by the Matera team to re-orient their co-creation festival to focus on pandemic-related issues. The report stresses the importance for ECoC teams of preparing contingency plans for different kinds of crises, in addition to COVID-19. These crises can range from extreme weather (likely to be more frequent due to climate change and causing, for example, the cancellation of the outdoors opening event of Galway 2020) to earthquakes (Rijeka 2020). Situations of uncertainty often placed ECoC teams under considerable stress (as in the cases of Kaunas, Novi Sad, Eleusis and Tartu) and highlighted the need for supportive cultural leadership.

The COVID-19 crisis certainly acted in many cases (in Aarhus, Leeuwarden and Matera, for example) as a stimulus for ECoC teams and city policy makers to take stock and discuss alternative scenarios for the future of their cities. It also produced important project innovations, including, for example, the focus on emotional health and the ‘Emotional reflector’ idea in Kaunas. Some ECoCs detected an interesting change in monitoring and evaluation imperatives, in a policy climate which, due to the disruptive influence of the pandemic, was in some cases more open-minded. There was perhaps less pressure to achieve measurable targets, and more attention to the qualitative aspects of projects. As one interviewee from Kaunas 2022 observed, audience target numbers (being outside anyone’s control) became less important, while the priority was to create something special.

Important questions remain about the likely behaviour of audiences after the pandemic. Will safety considerations continue to discourage particularly older people from attending and/or participating? Will people be reluctant to pay for cultural activities, partly as a result of the massively increased provision of free cultural contents during the pandemic?

It is as yet also unclear whether public funding and business sponsorship for ECoC projects would decline if there wasn’t a significant recovery of urban retail, cultural tourism and night-time economies. Lastly, more research is needed about the perspectives of citizens, artists and other independent cultural professionals about how the pandemic has affected the ECoC. It would also be interesting to find out more about the European Union’s views on how the ECoC can respond to the cultural sector’s financial and organisational difficulties in the post-pandemic period, and on the role of the ECoC in innovative urban cultural strategies.

Abbreviations

CDR – Central Denmark Region

EC – European Commission

ECoC – European Capital of Culture

EU – European Union

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- Katja Pasanen, Saimaa Phenomenon Project Manager in Research and Evaluation, University of Eastern Finland, 31.3.2021 (interviewed together with Anu-Anette Varho)
- Perttu Pesä, Tampere26 Project Director, 30.4.2021
- Piia Rantala-Korhonen, Oulu2026 Project Director, 25.3.2021
- Outi Rantasuo, Cultural Director of the City of Savonlinna, 4.5.2021
- Anu-Anette Varho, Saimaa Phenomenon Co-ordinator, Southern Savo / Mikkeli, 31.3.2021 (interviewed together with Katja Pasanen)

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