

THE CONDITIONAL GIFT – INTERPRETATIONS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN APPLYING FOR THE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE STATUS

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Abstract

European cities compete for the status of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC), as it is proven to enhance city visibility and the profile of cultural events in the city; it also allows addressing issues of strategic cultural development of the successful candidate. Importantly, the status comes with an explicit requirement to ensure sufficient public participation in developing the bid and implementing the cultural programme. Prior research demonstrates that meaningful participation is not easy to achieve; the research on that aspect is considered scarce.

The article aims to analyse the interpretation of public participation, its challenges and shaping factors as seen by ECoC bid-producing teams. The main research question is “What did the bid development process uncover about the capacity of bid-producing teams to foster public participation in the Latvian cities – ECoC finalists?”

The current paper examines the challenge of participation encountered in the process of developing the bid for the second round of ECoC 2027 by three applying cities in Latvia. The study was carried out between October 2022 and March 2023 using qualitative methodology. The theoretical starting point of the study is the four-part framework of factors influencing participation by Kaifeng Yang and Sanjay

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K. Pandey [Yang & Pandey 2011]. The study suggests that these factors are indeed useful in conducting an analysis of participation. In addition, the study supports the prior conclusions of scholarly literature pointing out that more nuanced language is needed to interpret participation and participants. The article pays special attention to the nuances of digital participation and the organisational characteristics of the public body in charge of participation in cultural planning.

Keywords: *ECoC status, public participation, cultural planning, digital participation.*

Introduction and the objective of the study

Bidding for the status of the ECoC and implementation of the successful cultural programme is a unique set of processes, activating a broad range of stakeholders for developing and carrying out a large-scale programme of cultural events.

While the programme has to be effective and meaningful in terms of the city's cultural strategic goals, one "official" precondition stands out and deserves particular attention – that of public participation in the programming and implementation of these events. One may view the exchange promised by the bidding city as receiving a gift (i. e., the status and the funding) and enacting the corresponding obligation to freely provide the return gift of increased public participation. We do not aim to carry out an ethnographic analysis here, but rather use the metaphor of gift giving in a general, abstract way, to point out that the status of the ECoC does not come without its conditions – and these conditions may not be easy to fulfil. Prior scholarly literature indeed points out that achieving meaningful participation is not easy [Biondi et al. 2020; Jancovich & Hansen 2018; Piber et al. 2017]. Moreover, as Tommarchi and colleagues point out [Tommarchi et al. 2018], such analyses are scarce.

This study will focus on participation in the process of developing the ECoC bid put into the context of the interpretation of the meaning of participation as reflected in the bid books as textual material. The objects of our study are the processes and resulting bid books of the three Latvian cities competing in the final stage of the bidding process in 2022.

The viewpoint reflected will be that of bid-producing teams, that is, local-government-approved agents in charge of achieving public participation. We also use the bid book texts (on participation) as a meaningful reflection of the context as seen by these teams. The teams are in the centre of our study as it is precisely these groups of agents who are in charge of promoting or engendering a response to the desired gift (that is, receiving the status of the ECoC).

The **main goal** of this article is to analyse the interpretation of public participation, its challenges and its shaping factors as seen by ECoC bid-producing teams.

We seek to answer the following research question:

What did the bid development process uncover about the capacity of bid-producing teams to foster public participation in the Latvian cities – ECoC finalists?

We believe that this article will contribute to the current understanding of public participation in cultural planning, specifically for large-scale cultural events requiring a sustained effort and the interface of local authorities and the general public.

Background

The sub-section outlines the background of the three cities-finalists in terms of the global context factors influencing public participation, the number of city inhabitants, population heterogeneity, and a short characterisation of the main theme of the winning application.

Initially, eight Latvian cities applied for the status of the European Cultural Capital 2027. The process of the development of the application was complicated by the start of the global pandemic. This strongly impacted the possibilities for active citizen involvement in usual forms, both by bringing the processes online and also by emotional distancing effects on the population. Instead of interactive workshops involving creative thinking methods and gamification elements, the collection of ideas from inhabitants took place mainly as online conversations in smaller groups. At first – it might seem a disadvantage but as organisers admit, it made it possible to hear quieter voices between loud opinions that usually dominate the process when decisions are made in groups.

After the pre-selection process, three Latvian cities – Daugavpils, Liepāja and Valmiera continued to the next round and Liepāja, Latvia's third-largest city, was selected to be European Cultural Capital 2027 together with Aveiro in Portugal.

Latvian candidate cities are comparatively small cities with quite diverse historical, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The total number of inhabitants in Latvia is 1.87 million; however, one-third of them live in the capital city – Rīga which is the biggest Latvian city [Centrālā statistikas pārvalde / The Central Statistical Bureau 2022]. According to the data of the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia in 2022, there are 79 120 inhabitants in Daugavpils and it is the second-largest city in Latvia. With 67 360 inhabitants, Liepāja is the third biggest Latvian city. Valmiera with its 22 757 inhabitants is 9 on the list of cities in Latvia [ibid.] Daugavpils is a multinational city – 48% of inhabitants are Russians, 21% of inhabitants are

Latvians, 13% are Polish, 7% are Belorussians, 2% are Ukrainian, and 9% belong to other nationalities [Pilsonības un migrācijas lietu pārvalde / Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs 2021]. The ethnic situation in Liepāja and Valmiera differs, while most of the inhabitants are Latvians – in Liepāja 59%, and in Valmiera around 85% [ibid].

Liepāja's ECoC theme – (un)rest – is inspired by the wind, which blows strongly in the city and, also metaphorically, from the city towards Europe. The bid is about taking an active stand on societal situations of rest and unrest by harnessing the wind and working with it to develop necessary cultural competencies for finding meaningful solutions [Expert Panel's report 2022: 11–12]. The ECoC expert panel report appreciates the focus of the bid on the alleged 85% non-active cultural consumers – in order to take a more inclusive approach and eliminate the existing polarization [Expert Panel's report 2022: 15].

Theoretical framework

Participation as an ECoC requirement

The status of ECoC is attractive for cities as a tool that allows putting culture in the centre of development for an extended period, to strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and increase the cultural activity of local inhabitants, to increase audience engagement [Tommarchi, Ejgod Hansen & Bianchini 2018]. It also can bring more materialistic benefits such as economic growth, the attraction of tourists and improvement of infrastructure [O'Callaghan & Linehan 2007; Campbell 2011]. One of the goals of the ECoC Programme is to increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area and participation plays a significant role in this mission. The rules of the programme foresee the strengthening of such aspects as:

- promotion of social inclusion and equal opportunities ensuring the broadest possible involvement of all the components of civil society;
- involvement of the local population and civil society in the preparation of the application and the implementation of the action;
- creation of new and sustainable opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural activities, in particular young people, volunteers and the marginalised and disadvantaged, including minorities, with special attention being given to persons with disabilities and the elderly as regards the accessibility of those activities [European Parliament 2014].

The following reasons for the rise of the participation idea are given by Enrico Tommarchi and colleagues: the need to redress the practice when up to the 1990s the public funding used to be given to predominantly elite art; the hope that participation

will provide a solution to increasing social isolation, the lack of intercultural dialogue; the need to address the pervasive crisis of democracy [Tommarchi et al. 2018].

Participation and its levels

There is a wide variety of terms used to characterise participation in cities – citizen participation, citizen involvement, civic engagement, co-creation, creation of cooperative ecosystems etc.

We define participation as civic involvement aiming at the joint creation and experiencing of cultural projects, events and experiences [Piber et al. 2017; Biondi et al. 2020].

As noted by Mario Ianniello and colleagues, *participation (..) is not a dichotomic variable: it can entail different levels of engagement* [Ianniello et al. 2019]. One way to look at it is to distinguish between four levels: (1) participating in the role of the spectator, (2) participation in the creation of the content of cultural events, (3) participation in the development of cultural programmes/projects (co-creation), (4) participation as a volunteer, involvement in events implementation [Tommarchi et al. 2018].

According to professor of Cultural Policy and Participation at Leeds University Leila Jancovich and professor at School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University Louise Hansen, analysing the case of Aarhus as an ECoC, several interpretations of participation may coexist in an ECoC programme. In their study [Jancovich & Hansen 2018], in some sub-projects “participation” meant attracting audience for a cultural event, in others the idea was closer to “civic participation”, while still in others – participation meant challenging the idea of how cultural institutions should work (this is the most transformative kind of participation). The same study found that “participation” differed greatly in the bid-production stage and in the implementation stage (when participation was mostly about attending the programme events) [ibid].

Challenges of participation

Prior research on the processes of implementing ECoC programmes suggests that there are numerous participation-related challenges.

One of the key conclusions is that the ECoC programme is too limited in duration to foster a meaningful change in participation modalities, scope and impact. Some researchers note that participation may serve instrumental ends, to offset the dissatisfaction of the local population with mass tourism and gentrification of ECoC site areas (cf. Tommarchi et al. 2018). Volunteer programmes tend to have a high assessment on “participation”; however, it must be noted that being a volunteer presumes that the individual has certain (unequally distributed) resources at their disposal.

The pervasive audit culture that requires pre-set levels of participation to justify the spent funding may have the effect of selecting safer options in event planning, addressing the already active segments of the population. Among the barriers of participation, some researchers name professionals who are too invested in their professional roles and scared of de-professionalisation as the result of too active participation processes.

All in all, research demonstrates that meaningful civic participation is a socially multi-layered process with a complex dynamic [Demartini et al. 2020; Tommarchi et al. 2018; Jancovich & Hansen 2018].

Factors that influence participation

A literature review on the general practice of citizen participation [Ianniello et al. 2019] suggests that there have been very few attempts to provide empirical evidence of the factors influencing citizen participation. To the best of the authors' knowledge, there has been no literature review as to participation in the context of ECoC, just isolated attempts to address the issue. We will briefly reflect on the current state of knowledge in this sub-section.

As shown by Ianniello and colleagues, there are three groups of significant factors: (1) contextual ones, in particular, information deficit and asymmetries among participants as well as the attitude of public officials [ibid: 26]; (2) organisational arrangements, especially community representation criteria and process design [ibid: 29]; (3) process management factors, in particular, group dynamics and issues related to the quality of collaboration [ibid: 32].

One of the studies on the influencing factors analysed the interpretations by public administration [Yang & Pandey 2011] and suggested four groups of factors. We selected this lens due to the fact that the subjects of our study are local government-endorsed bid-producing teams, that is, a part of the formalised governance. Yang and Pandey as researchers of public administration suggest that according to this group, outcomes of participation are influenced by the following factors:

- 1) competence and representation of residents (the competence in the issue; group representation rather than individuals; the risk of leaving out "insignificant" groups);
- 2) features of the governing body (hierarchy, red tape, centralised decision-making that relates negatively to information circulation and learning by doing);
- 3) mechanism of engagement (the desirability of using multiple engagement mechanisms and their match with the goals of participation (they foster the ability to reach agreement, responsiveness and trust));

- 4) features of the political environment (the form of governance; political culture; legal conditions; strong support by elected politicians fosters stability) [ibid].

Importantly, Yang and Pandey conduct a quantitative multivariate analysis to find out if all of the factors are equally important for public participation outcomes, and their conclusion is that the important variables are the support of elected politicians, limitations of red tape and hierarchical authority; that using multiple mechanisms is more likely to lead to good participation outcomes and participant competence is positively associated with participation outcomes [Yang & Pandey 2011: 887]. In fact, in the analysis by Yang and Pandey the participant competence is the strongest predictor of positive outcomes of public participation. As regards representation, the study found that there is a certain trade-off between competence and representation, hence the public administrators would do well if they conduct a thorough stakeholder analysis first [ibid: 888].

Based on these conclusions as sensitising ideas, we conducted our qualitative study, which is a case of involving inhabitants to voice their needs on desired developments in the cultural life of their city.

Methodology

Qualitative content analysis of applications and three in-depth interviews with the representatives of multisector bid-producing teams that were operating at a certain distance from the local government structures. All informants were female with considerable experience in cultural management. The interviews were carried out via Zoom for an average of one hour and analysed using the thematisation approach. The following aspects were emphasised in interview guidelines: (1) the current situation of public participation and the commitment towards the promotion of participation; (2) the manifestations of the four factors of public engagement during the bidding process; (3) the outcomes of the public participation exercise for the public administration bodies in charge of the ECoC bidding.

Results and discussion

We start the section with an analysis of the ECoC bid developers' description of the low participation problem and their commitments towards its increase. Later on, we discuss the four factors influencing participation [Yang & Pandey 2011], as well as the perceived outcomes of participation.

Overall, the interviewees from the three bidding cities emphasize that in Latvia, the involvement of inhabitants in the application development process cannot be taken for granted; prior to applying for the ECoC status, local participation level used to be low. All the interviewees consider the lack of participation a wider general

problem in Latvia. In their applications describing the current state of participation, the cities admit that the situation is problematic and there is a strong necessity for change.

The cities use specific figures both to express the level of participation and the commitment to change. Liepāja indicates that there is a lack of civic engagement and that too many people do not get involved in city life and do not express their opinions beyond writing comments in social media. With the help of the ECoC status, Liepāja wants to raise the number of active citizens from 14% to 30%, to reset the mindset – *from inertness to meaningful action*. Daugavpils as the second largest city of Latvia specifically mentions the low citizen involvement in the NGO sector, indicating that only 8.7% of all the NGOs of Latvia are active in the Latgale region. In its application, the team of Valmiera candidate city talks about the cultural gap; noting that *the city is at a cultural divide and that there is a need for bridging, a need to fill this existing gap with new, diverse contemporary cultural offerings*. Thus, the present state and the need for change is described through the metaphors of technology (“reset”) and doing away with a division (“fill the gap”).

In their applications, the cities (predictably) demonstrate a strong commitment to change, and citizen participation is described using such terms as meaningful change, openness, the willingness to listen, to care for each other etc. The three bid books refer to metaphors of belonging, commonality and mutual acceptance. For instance, Liepāja’s team stresses the wish to create an open and active community, to create a broad public engagement programme and increase the number of civically active people. There is a promise to *involve everyone who is ready* and to activate the volunteer movement. The bid includes a metaphorical comparison about the change of thinking: *from hotel to home* – inviting everyone to see their city as their home, not a hotel. Liepāja also plans a cultural renovation by expanding the concept of culture in the public consciousness and building the capacity of cultural operators. To create the necessary changes, Daugavpils uses the metaphor of a *common language that has to be found, created and spoken*. Culture is seen as the basis for a common language in a society that enables the celebration of different traditions and values. The team commits to help in the creation of an *open and integrated local community that cares for each other*, especially encouraging the participation of the population groups at risk of social exclusion. Creative, culturally educated and culturally active citizens and an increased number of NGOs are necessary to achieve the goals of Daugavpils. The city of Valmiera is committed towards significant change in thinking and attitudes of residents. By involving people in cultural processes, Valmiera wishes to *increase people’s critical thinking abilities and the recognition of the new and the different, to increase open-mindedness, empathy and self-awareness*. Deep and genuine community involvement is necessary to *achieve the significant transformation of the*

living environment of the city and county, becoming a highly cultural urban micro-city. Valmiera intends to start the DIY movement and to involve those 26% of residents who have expressed their ability to become volunteers of ECoC.

In the situation when the “gift” of the ECoC status is conditional upon ensured and promised participation, expressions of commitment are understandable. Less visible are offerings as to reasons for the present situation of low participation. In its bid, the Liepāja team stresses the fatigue and apathy of people caused by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The Daugavpils team describes the general confusion of people caused by fast-developing technologies, and stresses the historically determined fragility of the context – *the existence of unspoken and buried issues, past grievances and clashing viewpoints*, that can fan the flames of conflict in the community. Valmiera refers to alienation and individualisation, recognising that many people are *sceptical, in denial or simply inert*. Thus, we can conclude that only Daugavpils refers to issues and practices originating in the community itself; the other two bids attribute the low participation to either an external threat or presumably global social trends. We can also reiterate that neither city considers its level of participation to be unique, and all refer to the overall low participation in Latvia.

Next, we turn to the analysis of the four factors of effective participation as seen by the bid-producing team leaders.

Factor 1: Competence and representation of inhabitants

When discussing the process of involving inhabitants in the generation of ideas for the bid, the authors of bids noted their prior limited grasp of the heterogeneity of the city inhabitants and their interests. Despite the wide experience in the field of culture, tourism and municipal work, the authors of applications admit that they had had only a superficial knowledge of the big variety and specifics of different resident groups – *one can never know enough, but the genuine interest to build the application based on residents’ ideas is crucial*.

Some of the bid-producing teams noted that they had to devise a strategy for discussions with those who had a negative mind-set and did not offer anything apart from criticism: they listened to these individuals so that they could feel heard, but did not get into prolonged discussions with them. Overall, the bid-producing teams *talked to those persons who wanted to contribute*.

Interviewees admit that although it is vital to involve people who cover a wide range of sectors, fields and geography, it is not possible to involve everyone and there will always be someone who will complain of not being involved to a sufficient extent.

According to the interviewees, the process of joint discussions was indeed conducive to the generation of ideas – the inhabitants’ ideas were used to build the foundation of the applications, and most of the ideas were offered by the inhabitants.

This is a very necessary requirement, it prevents a municipality from making an application in isolation from the wishes of the citizens, from the thoughts of the citizens. It requires the application drafters to have an active conversation with the residents so that the application is not written but the residents have the feeling that it is not about us. (Interviewee, city Z)

Public involvement is very much needed. Because we are all in our own bubbles, we don't know what happens on the right, on the left, we just live in our own juice. Young people, for example, or seniors. As we started to get more and more involved, we realised that every group of people is so diverse and the needs, ideas, and thoughts are so nuanced. The youth! How incredible were their ideas! Or seniors – how knowing and open they are! We included not only diverse representatives from various professional fields; but also – taxi drivers, hairdressers etc. (Interviewee, city X)

Thus, the involvement of diverse groups indeed produced satisfaction of the bid-producing team with the results.

Factor 2: Features of the governing body

In the case of all three bid-producing cities, the teams were multisectoral and set at a certain distance from the local government structures. Being to a certain respect external allowed for considerable freedom in adopting operational decisions and implementing them. There was also a horizontal structure of sub-groups, each led by a professional in charge of achieving a joint process of idea generation.

A big advantage was that we didn't have specific positions in the municipality. We came from different spheres, we were able to take a step back from all these processes and we were able to look with a fresh eye at this community involvement. (Interviewee, city X)

In addition, in two cases there was also an added benefit of an external key expert in participatory processes, who in both cases was an artist, a theatrical or film director and thus a professional used to elicit the needed responses from the public.

He is an authority for the local cultural workers, he was very convincing and gave them confidence that he knows what he is doing. So, there were no questions why we should do it the way he wanted. At the same time – he was very successful in creating that bottom-up approach involving the people. (Interviewee, city Y)

We believe that the distance from the usual institutional set-up, the horizontal internal structures and the external expertise in response-building were crucial in implementing the broad programmes of idea generation that are in evidence in all three cities.

Factor 3: The mechanisms of engagement: the pros and cons of the digital environment

As mentioned before, the engagement process took place in the time of Covid-19 restrictions therefore most of the activities of engagement in all the cities took place in a digital environment which in the case of all three cities could be described as *extreme zooming* (e. g., Liepāja altogether had 1327 zoom conversations, up to 8 zooms per day). Other forms of engagement in candidate cities have been – open idea competition, future city games, educational seminars (Daugavpils); cultural mapping, working groups led by professionals, inhabitant forums (Valmiera) etc. One distinctive example of how to raise awareness about cities' wish to become cultural capital was used in Valmiera. Inhabitants were involved in a creative activity – the photo project “INSIDE OUT” that is described as the world's largest human photo project [Valmieras ziņas 2021] and could be implemented despite restrictions involving individual inhabitants from the whole county creating a common art piece.

There is unanimity of opinion on the strengths of online engagement – it was the ability to have a wider geographical coverage of people involved, saving of time and resources thus having more intensive, more targeted communication and the ability to hear the more silent voices.

The biggest advantage of digital communication was that we reached people who probably would not have come in person. It made it easier for people to plan their time, not having to go anywhere, not having to travel anywhere. You turn on your computer or your phone and that is it. You can do it in your pyjamas without turning on the camera. (Interviewee, city Z)

Zoom allowed the most silent voices to be heard, as it gave everyone the opportunity to say what they had to say in a comfortable environment of each person. (Interviewee, city X)

The main benefit was the constructive potential of the digital approach and high effectiveness that allowed the organisers to have many more meetings than otherwise possible. However, opinions differ on whether the digital format made the communication more focused and effective or whether it was the opposite – less effective in collecting and discussing ideas.

The pandemic helped us decide not to do anything unnecessary just to look good. We agreed as a team that there would be no flashy participatory events. (Interviewee, city X)

However, what we did, we could not have done in person. (Interviewee, city Z)

The opportunity to come together, to enter a common space, to look into each other's eyes, was stolen from us. The walking, the organising, was gone. However, the process was more intense because of that, and that was good. (Interviewee, city X)

But as far as the events are concerned, where it was important to exchange information, to plan, to have discussions, to get opinions, to get as much information as possible, it is clear that it would have been much easier in person, because digital communication, especially if there are many people involved, takes much more time and is not as productive. When everyone is sitting around a table and communicating face to face, it is more efficient and meaningful. (Interviewee, city Z)

The weaknesses of online engagement are the lack of emotions, energy of people and synergy of ideas. Teams were lacking the informal communication that is a vital part of workshops and seminars.

Workshops have the added value of informal communication, which is a definite disadvantage of digital communication. (Interviewee, city Z)

As mentioned before, the inability to organize large meaningful public engagement events for residents of the city online is also one aspect highlighted in interviews.

We couldn't do it so widely, so publicly, so that everyone felt involved. We did not reach everyone. We missed many people. (Interviewee, city X)

All the informants agree that overall there was a balance of pros and cons:

The digital format made easier our organisational work. However, there was a completely different feeling. The pros and cons balance out. (Interviewee, city Y)

There were groups that were excluded because of online communication – these are seniors in the case of Daugavpils, those who are not active in general in the case of Valmiera and those who have a negative mindset towards ECoC in the case of Liepāja. All the interviewees acknowledge having had difficulties with youth involvement.

Factor 4: The political environment (political culture, and support)

To ensure participation in the three bidding cities there was a demand for active input from the side of municipality officials who, as our study shows, do not always have a participatory mindset. For municipalities that could mean serious changes and overcoming of obstacles to introduce more involving, participatory approaches to the cultural and creative sector in the future.

Many of the ideas were very good, but it seems that the municipality is not ready yet to implement them. (Interviewee, city Z)

A common feature of the broader environment was the culture of top-down decisions and low cooperation between institutions.

Minimal involvement of different sectors, reluctant. Culture and creative sector professionals do not come to events of other institutions. I am already here in my own backyard, don't touch me. Often also happened, something is offered to the inhabitants, but nobody comes. There is a big division between institutions. There was this moment – ECoC – so we had no options, everyone was forced to get out of their house and come and talk. (Interviewee, city Y)

Support from the city authorities was strong enough to establish the multisectoral groups and provide additional funding for an external consultant.

The support of the council from day one was important; it is a big benefit for us. We have a very good cooperation. (Interviewee, city X)

In the case of Liepāja, who had already produced a first-stage bid for the bidding process several years ago (Riga was the winner then), this was a more familiar process and meant also certain expectations of being able to win this time. For the somewhat less likely winners, this was an opportunity to achieve an acceleration in the cultural processes and the dialogue among cultural institutions and inhabitants.

The outcomes and the future

Informants indicate that changes in thinking thanks to the ECoC demands of citizen involvement have already started, e. g. as a result of the ECoC application development process two of the cities have started co-financing project calls for the creative sector and citizen involvement; there are also plans for citizens' advisory board development, co-creation training for cultural and creative sector professionals etc.

The ECoC demands have served as a good benchmarking tool for the self-evaluation of prior participatory practices in municipalities and have served as an incentive to understand that there is much more to be done.

If it had not been for the preparation of the ECoC application, such citizen participation events would not have taken place. It was important to realise that we have a lot to do; we have a lot to work on ourselves. This was a great moment, a great circumstance that made everyone realise how far we have to go and what those steps could be. It has changed the way we think, and there is much more emphasis on citizen involvement in the city's cultural development planning. Events were organised from the top, someone would organise and give. Now we are thinking more and more about how to make the cultural content so that the inhabitant of the city, the public, is a co-creator, and that has been the most valuable benefit. To realise that the community is not only a consumer of culture but also a co-creator. (Interviewee, city Z)

According to the informants, the change of mind-set in municipalities and cultural and creative sector organisations thanks to the citizen engagement demands in the ECoC application is irreversible despite the specific situation in Latvia where people are hard to engage.

Surrendering to that process was worthwhile. It is not easy for a Latvian in general, because the practice of participation is not ingrained, but it is the most valuable and necessary thing and should not be given up. (Interviewee, city Y)

When making decisions now, we think more about whether people will be involved – that's become one of the evaluation criteria. (Interviewee, city Y)

We are seeing this now that the application process is over. The progress in participation is already noticeable, the activities that are taking place now are much better attended and the response is much higher. We have learnt a lot ourselves. (Interviewee, city Z)

The public engagement helped us assess what we needed to put in the application – it was our choice, our approach. (..) The more we looked into the application and made these requirements mandatory for ourselves, the more we realised that this is the only way we can actually change things. (Interviewee, city X)

However, we should not draw too optimistic a picture since for municipalities and cultural and creative sector organisations it can be difficult to change, to adapt.

The inhabitants of the city have been inspired by the engagement processes. They are ready to do, ready to generate new ideas, and ready to develop existing ones. We need to think about how to mobilise local authorities more to come forward to the citizens. (Interviewee, city Z)

The question of sustainability of the participatory processes is vital also after the year of ECoC.

It is still a matter of many years, of systemic change, of generational change. One ECG application is not enough. (Interviewee, city Y)

The ECE could be even more specific in asking that public engagement in cities continue beyond that (cultural capital) year. Sustainable projects on public participation should be explicitly requested. Then, perhaps at the national level, there should also be a framework for how to take things forward. (Interviewee, city X)

There is a wider demand for a change of mind-set also on a national level and the ECoC can serve as an incentive for that.

Conclusions and future research

The low level of participation in the three bidding cities is described in the bids as a grave problem, however, there is little offered by way of reasons for the situation and possible long-term strategies for changing the situation. The ECoC bid does not require such analysis; however, we feel that it might be beneficial for bid producers to engage in some reflection on that.

The bid development demonstrated the limited awareness on the part of various cultural professionals of the concrete traits and needs of specific societal groups. However, the scale of discussions with city inhabitants much exceeded all prior engagement activities by cultural operators.

The digital participation mechanisms demonstrated both benefits (more opportunity for an equal share of participation) and drawbacks (no informal communication, less access by seniors and vulnerable groups). More research is needed to determine the drivers and hindering factors of digital participation.

The unusually active process of securing public participation may have been possible mostly owing to the ECoC teams operating at a distance from the usual institutional set-ups and being organised in a horizontal manner.

Returning to the metaphor of the gift exchange, we conclude that in the case of the three bidding cities, even those who did not receive the gift were winners, as the normative push by the ECoC policy towards more participation has turned out to be a catalyst and accelerator at least of some institutional changes, strengthened networks, and a legacy of bottom-up ideas for future cultural life in these cities.

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