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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Ex Post evaluation of the 2015 European Capitals of Culture (Mons and Pilsen)

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is presented under article 12 of Decision No 1622/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October 2006 establishing a Community action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2007 to 2019¹, which requires that each year the Commission shall ensure an external and independent evaluation of the results of the European Capital of Culture event of the previous year and report on that evaluation to the other EU institutions.

This report intends to communicate the findings of the external evaluation of the 2015 European Capitals of Culture and the actions that the Commission will put forward in follow up to them. The evaluation methodology and findings are presented in the Staff Working Document on the evaluation of the 2015 European Capitals of Culture, which is based on the Final Report of the external evaluator².

2. BACKGROUND TO THE ACTION

2.1. The EU action for the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) event

The initial scheme of "the European City of Culture" was launched at intergovernmental level in 1985³. Decision No 1419/1999/EC⁴ established a Community action for the ECoC event for the years 2005 to 2019. Member States are ranked in a chronological order of entitlement to host the event each year. Decision No 1419/1999/EC was replaced by Decision No 1622/2006/EC which kept the principle of a chronological order of Member States but further refined the objectives of the action and introduced new selection and monitoring arrangements.

Under Decision No 1622/2006/EC, the ECoC overall aims are to highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures and the features they share, thereby promoting greater mutual understanding among European citizens, and to foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of the cities. ECoC shall strive to foster cooperation between cultural operators, artists and cities in Europe, foster the participation of the citizens living in the city and surroundings while raising the interest of citizens from abroad, and be sustainable and an integral part of the long-term cultural and social development of the city⁵.

Decision No 1622/2006/EC, repealed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 establishing a Union action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033, continues to apply in the case of the cities

¹ OJ L 304 of 3.11.2006, p.1.

² Full report available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/ecoc-2015-evaluation_en.pdf.

³ Resolution of the Ministers responsible for Cultural Affairs, meeting within the Council, of 13 June 1985 concerning the annual event 'European City of Culture' (85/C 153/02); <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:1985:153:0002:0003:EN:PDF>.

⁴ Decision 1419/1999/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 May 1999 establishing a Community action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2005 to 2019 (OJ L 166, 1.7.1999, p.1). That Decision was amended by Decision 649/2005/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (OJ L 117, 4.5.2005, p.20).

⁵ For more information: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en.

which have been designated or are in the process of being designated as European Capitals of Culture for the years from 2013 to 2019⁶.

2.2. The selection and monitoring of the 2015 European Capitals of Culture

In accordance with the Decision No 1622/2006/EC, Belgium and the Czech Republic were entitled to host the ECoC in 2015.

Parallel competitions were managed by the relevant authorities of the two Member States. The selection was in two phases: a pre-selection phase (candidate cities are reduced to a short-list) followed by a selection phase (the short-list is reduced to one single candidate). A panel of thirteen members – six of whom nominated by the Member State concerned and the other seven by European institutions – examined the bids from candidate cities on the basis of the objectives and criteria laid down in the Decision.

In Belgium, there was only one candidate city. In the Czech Republic, three cities applied, from which two were short-listed⁷. In 2010, the panel recommended that Mons in Belgium and Pilsen in the Czech Republic be awarded the ECoC title.

The Council of Ministers of the European Union formally designated Mons and Pilsen as ECoC 2015 respectively in November 2010 and May 2011.

After their nomination, the two cities were subjected to monitoring arrangements: the progress in the cities' preparations was monitored and guided by a panel composed of the seven independent experts appointed by the Union institutions, which also checked compliance with the programme and commitments on the basis of which the cities had been selected. The representatives of Mons and Pilsen attended two formal monitoring meetings convened by the Commission, in the autumn 2012 and spring 2014. At the end of the monitoring process, the panel made a positive recommendation to the Commission to award a EUR1.5 million prize in honour of Melina Mercouri to both Mons and Pilsen.

2.3. The themes and focus of the 2015 European Capitals of Culture

The overall theme of Mons 2015 was "where technology meets culture" and the ambition was to put the city on the European map as a symbol of economic restructuring based on a successful alliance between culture, tourism and new technologies. Its cultural programme was divided into four seasons: "Dazzle" (to bring light and warmth to the winter months); "Metamorphosis" (to emphasise the arrival of spring and changes taking place in Mons with new infrastructure developments and possibilities offered by new technology); "Escale" (to encourage visiting or staying in Mons during the holiday period); and "Renaissance" (to emphasise the rebirth of Mons after the decline of key industries with a focus both on the historical characters of the city's "golden age" and on future developments).

The motto of Pilsen 2015 was "Open up!" and expressed the city's ambition to use its ECoC year to open itself up towards Europe and other external influences. Throughout 2015, cultural events and experiences were delivered in Pilsen across four main streams: "Arts and Technologies" (to celebrate and strengthen the link between Pilsen's industrial background, crafts, skills and business); "Relationships and Emotions" (to open up the public space of the city and engage the public in a discussion about their personal and national identity); "Transit and Minorities" (to highlight the diversity of the city and its population); and "Stories and Sources" (to promote tourism based on some of Pilsen's personalities and to reminisce about past events and experiences).

⁶ OJ L 132, 3.5. 2014, p. 1

⁷ All pre-selection, selection and monitoring reports of the panel are available at the following webpage: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en.htm.

3. THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION

3.1. The terms of the evaluation

The evaluation explores the implementation of the two ECoC 2015 throughout their lifecycle, from their early inception through to their sustainability and legacy, and considers the impact of hosting the title in the two cities. In particular, it assesses their relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. It also examines the EU added value as well as the coherence and complementarity of the action to other EU initiatives. Finally, it draws individual and general conclusions emerging from the two ECoC 2015 and considers implications for future ECoC title-holders.

3.2. Methodology and limitations of the approach chosen

The evaluation and its methodology were designed to satisfy the standard requirement of the Decision, and contribute to develop a more detailed understanding of the performance and achievements of the action. In particular, it provides an opportunity to look back at the previous year in order to highlight lessons and recommendations going forward based on the experiences of the two host cities.

The methodology for the evaluation of the 2015 ECoC largely follows the approach adopted in previous studies of the action⁸.

As for ECoC 2007-2014 previous evaluations, the intervention logic used by the evaluator is based on a hierarchy of objectives corresponding to the Decision.

In order for results to be comparable with previous evaluations, the methodology also follows a consistent approach for evidence gathering and analysis. The two cities were evaluated individually, based on primary data either collected during the fieldwork or provided by each ECoC, as well as the analysis of a range of secondary data sources.

Primary data sources included interviews conducted during two visits to each city or by telephone, as well as through an online survey in Mons (for Pilsen the contractor relied on the survey performed by the implementing body itself). These interviews sought to gain a variety of perspectives on each ECoC, including those of the management teams, decision-makers at local and national levels, plus key cultural operators, a range of partners involved in the delivery of the ECoC and a sample of organisations either leading or participating in ECoC projects.

The secondary data sources included information in the original ECoC applications, studies and reports produced or commissioned by the ECoC, events programmes, promotional materials and websites, statistical data on culture and tourism and quantitative data supplied by the ECoC on finance, activities, outputs and results.

As was the case with all previous ex post ECoC evaluations, the Commission considers that this methodology is appropriate to produce a report providing a reasonably solid basis on which sound conclusions can be drawn as to ECoC performance.

There is however a lack of hard evidence on the benefits and impact of the ECoC on the two host cities, partly due to the time and budget constraints of the evaluation. A study which provides a before ("baseline") and an after picture would be ideal for assessing the full benefits and impact of the ECoC action. However, budget⁹ and timing¹⁰ constraints only allow an ex-post evaluation to take place and therefore only an after picture has been studied.

⁸ See evaluation reports at:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/more_info/evaluations/index_en.htm?page=1&mx=12.

⁹ The budget allocated to the evaluation work is proportionate to the level of EU funding directly provided to the ECoC (€1.5m Melina Mercouri Prize).

As a result, the report's conclusions are more substantiated by the views and opinions of various types of stakeholders than on the (limited) quantitative data available.

On the other hand, most of the qualitative evidence, in the form of an on-line survey and interview results, is limited to those directly involved in and somehow benefiting from the programme.

Furthermore, some of the objectives set are also broad and difficult to measure and it is too early for this evaluation to have been able to assess any longer term impacts. As a consequence, much of the evidence focuses on outputs and results or emerging higher level benefits rather than on harder on the ground impacts, which will take more time to materialize. In order to better capture such impacts, it would be useful for the two cities to have longitudinal evaluations, notably to confirm the efficiency of the public spending in the ECoC from a cultural, social and an economic points of view, also using a broader range of evaluative data to support the conclusions.

The Commission is fully aware – and accepts – such limitations, which were already identified in its staff working document accompanying its proposal for a Decision establishing a Union action for the ECoC for the years 2020 to 2033¹¹. To remedy the situation, the Commission's proposal and the Decision ultimately adopted on this basis¹² foresee that the cities themselves – better positioned to get primary data on the impact of the title – become the key players in the evaluation process.

Against this background, it is good to see that Mons and Pilsen have been carrying research¹³ to better understand the impact of the ECoC on cultural institutions and local residents, as well as in terms of international dimension and economics.

The Commission finds however a sufficient basis in the data and other evidence supporting the evaluation to allow it to share the overall assessments and conclusions of the evaluation, which are considered to provide a broadly true and complete picture of the two ECoC 2015, although lacking strong data and other independent evidence to support very solid conclusions on efficiency and impacts.

4. MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION REPORT

4.1. Relevance of the ECoC action and the two 2015 ECoC

According to the findings of the evaluation, the two host cities saw the ECoC mainly as a cultural event strengthening and internationalising their cultural offering as well as promoting the cultural diversity and common cultural features of Europe. The ECoC year included a cultural programme that was more extensive, more innovative and more European in nature compared to the usual cultural offer in the two cities. The evaluation concludes that this made the ECoC a very relevant action in relation with Article 167 TFEU looking at the Union's contribution to the "flowering of the cultures of the Member States".

The evaluation highlights that Mons and Pilsen also used their ECoC status to tackle other aspects of their respective city's development strategy. As a consequence, many of the activities delivered in 2015 were highly relevant to the two cities' overall political agendas, as well as to a range of EU level priorities and objectives in policy areas other than culture, such

¹⁰ Decision No 1622/2006/EC requires that the Commission conducts the evaluation immediately after the title year.

¹¹ See SWD(2012) 226 final, point 2.4.4.

¹² Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, see footnote n° 6.

¹³ Some of the results of this research were still in draft form at the time when the European evaluation of the ECoC action was finalised. The European evaluation used as much of this secondary information as possible, but could not benefit from its final results.

as urban and regional development, employment, enterprise, tourism as well as general social cohesion policies.

4.2. Efficiency

Overall, the ECoC action was implemented efficiently at EU level. The selection process enabled the selection of cities with the capacity, resources and vision to implement effective ECoC. Both cities also benefited from the monitoring arrangements at EU level and from the informal support given by the monitoring panel and the European Commission. At the same time, the very modest funding directly provided by the EU (in the form of the Melina Mercouri prize) can be said to have had a considerable leverage effect by stimulating the two cities – but also their respective regional and national authorities – to invest considerable sums in their ECoC programmes (approximately around EUR 72.8 million in the case of Mons and EUR 18.2 million in the case of Pilsen) and in associated infrastructure developments (EUR 143.5 million for Mons and EUR 48.6 million for Pilsen).

At the city level, both Mons and Pilsen established delivery mechanisms that were strong, and they delivered their ECoC in an efficient way, as both used national and EU funds to implement cultural programmes of high artistic quality and of considerably greater size than the cities' "usual" cultural offering.

4.3. Effectiveness

The ECoC action in 2015 has proved effective against the objectives set for it at EU level, as well as the objectives set by the cities holding the title. The action has achieved an impact that would not have arisen through the actions of Member States alone. In the absence of ECoC, both the 2015 title-holders would have been free to invest their own resources in implementing cultural programmes and developing their cultural infrastructure. However, their designation as ECoC attracted additional resources, including from private sponsors (more than EUR 2 million in the case of Mons and EUR 1.175 million, i.e. 6,4 % of the total budget in Pilsen). It also attracted greater media coverage: in Mons, 450 international journalists were accredited and there were 3,717 articles in the international press or items on international radio and television while a total of 325 foreign journalists visited Pilsen and many more local and national journalists attended (and covered) various ECoC activities, resulting in 3,500 news pieces that directly related to the ECoC across local, national and international press outlets published between in 2015. The ECoC title also enhanced local pride in the city and an increase in national and international tourist visits: a five-fold increase in tourist visits registered in Mons tourist office during 2015 and a total of 1,4m visitors in Pilsen, representing a 28 % increase from the two previous years.

The ECoC title helped the two cities present "new" and "better" cultural content than was previously the case, such as new uses of public spaces with open air events, festivals and urban art installations, and increased citizens' participation in cultural events, Mons being more effective than Pilsen in targeting specific groups in the city, in particular the young, the old and the disadvantaged. Finally, in both cities, the ECoC title maximised the opportunity to strengthen local cultural organisations, encouraged them to work with one another more than they did previously and helped capacity building.

These benefits would have been unlikely to arise to the same extent in the absence of ECoC designation; in that sense, the ECoC action has generated clear European added value.

4.4. Sustainability

The timing of this evaluation makes it difficult to draw conclusions about sustainability.

However, both 2015 ECoC genuinely thought and planned for sustainability and legacy. They were both keen to ensure that ECoC lasted more than one year in terms of its benefits and

impact. The research also identified some potential for sustainability of activities and impetus, particularly in Mons where there are concrete plans for a legacy event (Mons Biennale 2018).

As with other recent ECoC evaluations, stakeholders in Mons and Pilsen articulated the legacies of the year in terms of stronger skills, stronger relationships and a higher profile for culture in the city more widely. In both cities, another long-term legacy has been around how the programmes have attracted a new type of audience to experience and enjoy culture.

Further research is nevertheless needed to identify the extent of sustainability in practice.

5. MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION AS WELL AS CONCLUSIONS AND ACTIONS FROM THE COMMISSION

The Commission concludes from this report that the ECoC action remains extremely relevant at EU level as well as highly valued by those cities who host it, and generates extensive cultural programmes with positive outputs and impacts which cannot, however, be fully assessed yet. Only longitudinal evaluations carried out by the host cities themselves – as mentioned under 3.2 – could provide a clearer picture in this regard.

The Commission also concludes that the programmes implemented by the two 2015 title-holders were innovative and consistent with the objectives of the ECoC action; they reflected its European dimension, involved many local residents and stakeholders, brought culture to new audiences through specific strategies (in particular in Mons, to a lesser extent in Pilsen) and have a planned legacy both physical (new cultural venues) and intangible (in the form of a biennale in Mons, and in the form of increased capacity and cultural offer in both cities).

The evaluation makes recommendations both for the cities and for the Commission.

The recommendations addressed to the cities include the need for national buy-in and involvement, the need to ensure continuation of people and cultural structures, the need to think carefully about new cultural buildings, the need to be realistic about the potential to attract foreign visitors and the need to confirm and communicate key events as early as possible. The evaluator also encourages small cities not to be deterred from bidding for the ECoC just because they have a relatively small budget. These recommendations are useful for new candidates when preparing a bid or for designated cities when developing and implementing their programmes. Following a suggestion made by the evaluator in its previous report, the Commission already added these new recommendations to the compendium of recommendations it produced and published on its website¹⁴ as a further reference to bidding cities. The Commission explicitly refers to and draws on these recommendations when participating in information sessions on European Capitals of Culture.

The report recommends the Commission to continue with the action in line with Decisions No 1622/2006/EC and No 445/2014/EU. Further to this, it recommends that the Commission envisages the following:

- Revise the guidelines for evaluation for the cities, and the application form and progress report requirements, to ensure that cities provide baseline data on the situation prevailing at the time of application and during preparation, that can help evaluating the impacts of the action after the year.
- Invite the cities to sign a Memorandum of Understanding to cover the period from designation to completion of the title year. This MoU should regulate the relations

¹⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/library/ecoc-compendium-recommendations_en.pdf

between the city, the Commission and the monitoring panel and complement the provisions of the Decisions governing the action.

- Undertake more extensive publicity related to the Award of the Melina Mercouri prize, including a symbolic award ceremony.
- Undertake research into the long-term impacts of the ECoC.

The Commission welcomes these recommendations and considers that they are feasible and will add value to the current implementation of the action.

The Commission will revise its guidelines for evaluation as well as its progress report requirements this year in order to invite cities to collect baseline data. However, it is up to the cities themselves to act on this and ensure an appropriate collection of useful data. The application form already includes a question on the baseline studies or surveys that applicant cities intend to use in order to evaluate the impact of the ECoC title.

The Commission will draft a Memorandum of Understanding to be signed by future European Capitals of Culture entering the monitoring process. This will first apply to the ECoC 2020 and ECoC 2021, the monitoring of which starts in 2017. The monitoring phase is already too advanced with the ECoC 2018 and 2019 for such a MoU to be of any relevance.

The Commission will investigate the possibilities of a ceremony being organised for the award of the Melina Mercouri prize in Brussels or in the awarded cities. Where possible, this will be done already for the ECoC 2018, i.e. Leeuwarden (Netherlands) and Valletta (Malta).

Finally, regarding the research into the long-term impacts of the European Capitals of Culture, the Commission points out to the very useful and comprehensive study produced by the European Parliament in December 2013 on "European Capitals of Culture: Success Strategies and Long-Term Effects". It therefore does not find it appropriate to produce a new report covering the same research area at this point in time, but does not exclude to explore options to do so at a later stage.