

# **Reprogramming Timișoara: How the Covid-19 Pandemic Influences the Course of a European Capital of Culture**

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Master Thesis  
June 2021

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### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly influenced the cultural sector, and in the case of the European Capitals of Culture programme this meant postponing the future titles. For Timișoara (Romania) this meant a two-year period to rethink its programme, from 2021 to 2023. This study follows the process of the programme reconfiguration from the perspective of audiences, entrepreneurship and transition economies. The research focuses on the outlooks of the local cultural operators regarding the future of the title, thus including them as well in the discussion on how the title should adapt to the 2023 perspective. Through observation and semi-structured interviews, the research demonstrates that in the context of the pandemic, the events need to be rescaled, that predictability and stability are key, and that collaboration and networking are paramount to the success of the title.

**Keywords:** European Capitals of Culture, Timișoara, audiences, entrepreneurship, transition economies, Covid-19.

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## 1. Introduction

The pace at which the world is changing is faster today than in any other time, while paradoxically most people are stuck in their homes. The SARS-COV 2 pandemic put the world on hold, with little clue as of a termination date, and only hopes animate a gloomy future. For the cultural sector in many countries, the pandemic proved to be devastating, especially for the independent sector, often left without a safety net. In the case of European Capitals of Culture (ECoC henceforth), both present and future, the task of preparing and carrying out a programme got complicated to an unimaginable degree. There are still hundreds of questions without answers as to how could *the show go on*. Nevertheless, culture always finds a way to slip through the cracks and survive.

In August 2020 the European Commission released a statement that intended to grant more time to the scheduled European Capitals of Culture. This was later solidified into a decision adopted on 23 December 2020, modifying the calendar for the ECoC programme. The 2020 ECoCs, Rijeka (Croatia) and Galway (Ireland), could extend their programmes until April 2021, while the candidates for 2021 got postponed: Novi Sad (Serbia) would hold the title in 2022, while Timișoara (Romania) and Elefsina (Greece) get to exercise their title in 2023 (European Commission, August 2020). Each ECoC is different and faces its own challenges, especially during the pandemic. The safety recommendations are volatile and depend on local developments of the pandemic situation. That is one of the reasons why this research focuses on one case study, a city which was supposed to hold the ECoC title in 2021, but which has now been postponed to 2023: Timișoara, Romania. Other reasons why Timișoara was chosen as a case study are related to the researcher's embeddedness in the local context, understanding of the economic and social background of the city, and long-standing informal observation of the development of the ECoC programme as well as participation in some of its events.

There are numerous questions to answer when such a complex and important cultural programme has to morph into something not completely known yet. What this study will seek to elucidate is: how will the municipality of Timișoara reshape its cultural programme for the European Capital of Culture title in 2023 to correspond to a pandemic world, and a highly uncertain social context – from a perspective of audiences, entrepreneurship and the city's profile as a transition economy?

This study is focused on the processual side of the preparations, and not necessarily on the end results. Rather, an accent is put on the development itself, as to what are the reference points when reshaping the programme, who are the main actors on this scene, what are the uncertainties, and on the other hand what is still infallible in the plan – programme-wise and institutionally – but above all, what is the role that the pandemic has played for this title. The study is based on developing empirical information, as the situation in Timișoara is evolving, and progress is announced almost on a weekly basis. The time length to which this study extends is the end of May 2021.

“Sometimes big changes start on street corners” (Bid book 2016, 3) – the opening line of the Bid book, based on which Timișoara won the title of ECoC for 2021, captures not only the essence of the city, but of the entire programme. There is an enhanced focus on audiences, on the multicultural active spirit of the city, and on the cultural creative industries. As a city, Timișoara is unique in many ways, and has the potential to create a successful interdisciplinary European cultural programme as a European Capital of Culture (section 2.1 offers an ample explanation in this sense).

The Bid book of Timișoara, which lays out its cultural programme for the ECoC title, has a clear vision centred around people – seen as individuals, as audiences, as co-creators, as communities. Time and again throughout the candidacy portfolio there is an orientation towards audience development, and how people can contribute to the programme. In this sense, the programme aims to cultivate a bottom-up enthusiasm regarding the carrying out of the title programme. Due to this community-oriented vision, it is all the more interesting to observe how the cultural programme will shift as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Appendix B offers a more ample overview of the Bid book programme as well as a summary of the changes it has gone through in the preparation years.

The topic under scrutiny is in this case highly intricate and there are many facets to this programme redesign. To be more specific, the research will revolve around three pillars of knowledge: regarding audiences, what shape does audience engagement and interaction take in a pandemic uncertain context? What can still be delivered to the public? And what needs to change?; regarding entrepreneurship, the independent cultural sector was most vulnerable to the changes that the pandemic brought. What is the strategy to provide more support to the cultural entrepreneurs?; and finally regarding the transition economy dimension, how does the nature of Romania as a transition state affect the process of programme redesign, since it takes place mainly at a local, regional and national level?

The context in which these bureaucratic, creative, administrative, even artistic changes take place cannot be ignored. Romania has a profile of a transition economy, with a long-standing post-communist legacy. There is a substantial body of literature that engages with this topic under many aspects, and Timișoara is a valuable case study to observe how a large-scale European project is implemented in a transition country, and what are the characteristics of such an undertaking.

The three main coordinates that this study is based on – audiences, entrepreneurship and transition economies – relate to the particularities of the chosen case study, but also to the wider socio-economical context. First, the paper pays attention to audiences because throughout the Bid book this is a central point of most projects. The way in which the success of an ECoC is measured in literature often times relates to the perception of the audience – both the local and the internationally attracted one – so the topic of audiences and Timișoara 2023 is relevant not only for the way in which the programme will be redesigned, but also evaluated in the end. Secondly, another explored area is that of entrepreneurship, and implicitly of independent cultural operators. The pandemic has been most pressing on this group of professionals, and the ECoC programme has the potential to play a part in their revitalization. Lastly, this research will acknowledge another layer of the issue, that of the transition economies. There are many ways in which cultural practices and policies are influenced by the larger socio-economic standing of a country, and being part of a transition economy, Timișoara as an ECoC is prone to having some particular practices when it comes to (cultural) governance – this study aims to identify these and understand how they influence the process of the ECoC redesign. This study will apply a qualitative approach, using the design of a case study and the method of semi-structured interviews, combined with ample observation of the local developments and desk research of primary source documents relating to the issue of ECoCs.

The scientific relevance of this research resides in that it focuses on the actual processual aspect of preparing an ECoC in the face of a global pandemic, and not necessarily on how the decisions that are made are implemented. The purpose is not to evaluate results, but to follow the complex development of major events such as ECoCs. This study both unfolds and concludes at a time where changes are still being made, agreements renewed and new structures established. In this sense, the success of the ECoC programme is only prefigured and not evaluated. Lastly, the conclusions of this study are formulated at a time when the programme still has space to develop in one direction or another, and thus it could

serve as a tool for the parties involved. On the other hand, the social relevance of this study consists of its major focus placed on the cultural operators in the city, the implementors and beneficiaries of the programme and its success, the practitioners for whom often times cultural policies are formulated. Thus, the present study offers this group of people a platform to be part of a larger conversation regarding the future of the ECoC programme in Timișoara specifically, and that of their practice more generally.

This study begins by looking at relevant literature in Chapter 2, which is split into subsections, each concerned with one aspect of the study. This part begins by offering an overview of Timișoara's characteristics as a city, and then of the ECoC programme in general. This way, a common understanding is established for the main pillars of the study, Timișoara and ECoCs, and more applied discussions on the chosen topics can unfold. The following four subsections propose a broad overview on the topics of the implementation of past ECoCs which are relevant to the experience of Timișoara, audiences, entrepreneurship and transition economies. For this first part, the researcher analysed both academic literature, and specialty literature published under the EU aegis, monitoring reports of the European Commission, and decisions pertaining to the shape of the ECoC programme to better understand what are the points where the pandemic could have had significant influence on the initiative. To conclude this section, a theoretical framework is operationalized, which constitutes the basis for the discussions with the interviewees. The following section regarding methodology explains the choice of method and the reasoning behind it, highlighting the manner in which connections are made between the desk research and the field study. The fourth part is concerned with the analysis of the field observation and semi-structured interviews. The section begins with a few general remarks regarding these methods, followed by a structured discussion by topics – audiences, entrepreneurship, the ECoC experience, and transition economies. Besides the three main concepts in the latter part, another significant dimension emerged: the governance of ECoCs, which is in part tied to transition economies, but not only, and it is especially relevant for the dynamics an ECoC programme creates within a community. The study is wrapped up by a set of conclusions emerging from the analysis of the primary material and the evidence provided by the literature. Lastly, a succinct set of recommendations is laid out based on the conclusions, rounding off with an evaluation, and some suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 City Characteristics

Understanding the concept and vision of the ECoC programme for Timișoara 2021/2023, and the ways in which it can change, involves having an idea of what the city is. The Bid book mentions the concept of “spirit of Timișoara” (2016, 3), but at a first look it may be difficult to fully grasp its significance. For a better understanding of the configuration of the programme and the way in which it evolved, Appendix B is useful to the reader.

Timișoara is the capital of the historic region of Banat, a region which today extends over three countries: Romania, Serbia and Hungary. Historically, it has been a point of convergence for numerous cultures. Timișoara portrays itself as the *spiritus movens* of the region, a bridge between the Austro-Hungarian Empire legacies, and the South-East European spirit. For a brief period in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Timișoara was an Ottoman pashalik, and later also part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, between 1716 and 1778. In 1771 the first German language newspaper in South-East Europe, *Temeswarer Nachrichten*, was published in Timișoara, a sign telling of the significant German speaking population in the region (Bid book 2016, 3). Researchers have pointed out that “the long ago politics of the formerly empires left an impressive cultural heritage in the cities for then state-socialist rules to completely reframe their cultural landscapes” (Pavel and Jucu 2019, 14). The multicultural legacy can be observed in the cultural life of the city until today: there are three state theatres in three languages – German, Hungarian and Romanian (Bid book 2016, 3). Timișoara is also the city where the 1989 anti-communist revolution began, so the city’s ties with concepts like innovation and freedom run deep.

In terms of cultural heritage, the city is rich in urban icons, which are regarded by the literature to be some of the “main tools in city branding” (Pavel and Jucu 2019, 2). The open public space is a relevant tool for contouring the identity of the city: „many squares preserve old historic cultural features (Maria Square, Iosefin Square, Traian Square, and the Bastion area) and there are also significant squares with both historic structures and new post-socialist features” (Pavel and Jucu 2019, 13). The Bid book signals the presence of 340 squares, parks and inner yards, along with 47 heritage sites that contribute to constructing the character of the city (Bid book 2016, 67).

The current cultural landscape of Timișoara experiences the “growing pains of any middle-sized, economically stable Central European city” (Bid book 2016, 4) – the potential for action exists, but it is latent, so it must be exploited. According to Romania’s National



Institute of Statistics (2017), Timișoara has a population of 331,927 (Pavel and Jucu 2019, 6). A study of West University Timișoara identified that the city locals are “active cultural consumers” (referred to in Bid book 2016, 6). At the time of the application for ECoC in 2016, Timișoara had 55 active cultural institutions— it is highly possible that the figure has changed in the past five years, especially since March 2020, but there are no available figures for that matter yet. The Cultural and Creative Industry (CCI) totalled 1450 companies in 2016, employing approximately 6467 people, in sectors such as computer game and software development, marketing, architecture, media, and design (Bid book 2016, 9). Unfortunately, there are no updated figures available. The city is also a significant academic hub, hosting in 2016 eight universities.

There are structural issues that influence the development and state of the local cultural landscape. For instance, the local budget for culture more than doubled between 2011 and 2016, from approximately € 4 million to more than € 8 million (Bid book 2016, 78). The plan was to create a special budget line for around € 20 million until 2022 (Bid book 2016, 78), but this plan succumbed to political struggles and changes in local administration, along with issues with the top management of the association in charge of the funding distribution, on top of which the pandemic-generated crisis created an environment of insecurity for the entire project. Additionally, around 85-88% of this local cultural budget is directed towards public institutions, while only 12-15% is left for the independent sector (Bid book 2016, 6). Thus arises the question of how does this budget division affect civic engagement and entrepreneurship in the cultural sector – a point which the ECoC application emphasized often. The application document pointed out the underdevelopment of the independent sector, which was aimed to be mitigated through various funding opportunities. However, this has not yet been reflected by the break-down of the budget.

In terms of cultural policy, Timișoara benefits from having a cultural policy drafted from 2014 until 2024. It is not the purpose of the study to assess the implementation of the local cultural policy, but there can be identified some points of convergence between the Bid book and the local cultural policy document. This proves that the Bid book is based on the cultural needs of the city. One example in this sense is the establishment of a multicultural hub that would combine the cultural sector with the technological sector, and with an added educational dimension (Bid book 2016, 72, Cultural Strategy of Timișoara 2014, 20-21). This bears the name of Multiplexity in current discussions in the public space, and is intended to be the main infrastructure legacy of the ECoC title (Weekly Press Conference 18 May 2021).

The two documents are designed as to mutually strengthen each other, precisely with the ECoC legacy in mind (Bid book 2016, 10). However, with regards to the cultural strategy of the city previous studies signal that “the implementation of this well-designed document is yet close to null” (Popescu and Voiculescu 2020, 8). Towards the end of the period, in 2024, an evaluation is bound to take place and establish what was and was not accomplished.

While the city has an intercultural, active, entrepreneurial spirit, there are struggles that the status quo poses. A few are highlighted in the Bid book and marked as challenges to be overcome during the candidacy preparation and completion: overall cultural coherence, capacity building, audience development, professional innovation, international co-productions (Bid book 2016, 7). More than that, there are challenges that are not directly tied to the cultural makeover of the city, but which influence it, such as the hard infrastructure, which is “the backbone of every tourist system” (Popescu and Voiculescu 2020, 4). Researchers preoccupied with the city have identified traffic to be “one of the most problematic infrastructural aspects of Timișoara”, and, in their analysis, the public transport system was also included as an issue to be tackled. (Popescu and Voiculescu 2020, 4-5). The ECoC title could represent a catalyser for such challenges to be overcome in a timelier manner. That is to say that the title could contribute to the urban regeneration of the city.

## **2.2 Vision of the European Capitals of Culture Programme**

The European Capitals of Culture programme debuted in 1985, and was designed as a sequence of one-year cultural projects in various cities of the European Union. It was an initiative of the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, and French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, and was conceived as a tool in European integration and collaboration. Culture has always been regarded as an “essential building block of closer European collaboration” (Urbančíková 2018, 43). Some of the initial objectives of the ECoC programme included that cultural activity would increase, new audiences be reached, the local cultural operators gain a more international outlook and in the long-term a socio-economic development of the cities be achieved (European Capitals of Culture – 30 years). The growth of the programme was organic and rather decentralized, and it was acknowledged that “the ‘fundamental value of this initiative’ was that ‘it was not dreamt up by some Brussels bureaucrat’ but gradually taken up by various European actors – from cities to independent experts (Patel 2013, 542). In 2006, “a ‘monitoring and advisory panel’ [was created] in order to control the implementation”, a measure which contributed to the decentralization of the project away

from the direct control of the EU institutions, and put more focus on networks and local governance (Patel 2013, 546). The value of these transnational experts resides in “improving and professionalizing ECOC activities at the procedural level”, and influencing “the orientation and evolution of the content of the activities by pushing for urban regeneration” as one of ECoC’s core missions (Patel 2013, 539).

From aiming to promote the EU “as an attractive brand to its citizens (Lewi 2004, quoted in Urbančíková 2018, 43), the programme shifted over the years “towards presenting arts and culture as an economic driving force” (Urbančíková 2018, 43). Another transformation was the involvement of the citizens as active participants in the act of culture instead of being passive consumers, thus encouraging cohesion and dialogue (Urbančíková 2018, 46). Over the years, the programmes grew in terms of budget and on the other hand it was not only big cities (with more than half a million inhabitants) that were awarded the title, but also medium-sized and smaller cities. In a study on the subject, Nataša Urbančíková identified eight types of ECoCs between 1991 and 2014, using the clustering method. There is thus great diversity among the ECoCs, and each case has its particularities. In 2014, a new statute was adopted for the shape of the programme between 2020 to 2033 (Decision No 445/2014). It is within this cycle that Timișoara 2021/2023 had to integrate.

Over the years there were a number of decisions and reports that changed the format of the programme. In 1999 a new element was explicitly introduced in official ECoC documents: a strong focus on local involvement, the “contribution to the development of economic activity” and even on cultural tourism (Patel 2013, 544). Also, the concept of European Dimension was refined as “based principally on cultural cooperation”, while previously the 1985 framework only referred to “wider European cultural affinities” (Patel 2013, 544). This shift is relevant for the case study of Timișoara because, as it will be explained at large during the analysis of the interview material, due to financial instability, Timișoara failed to establish long-term international cultural partnerships. Another novelty introduced in 1999 was that each member state would have a year reserved in which to host the event (Patel 2013, 542), and since 2009 at least two ECoCs would be designated: “one from a member that joined before and a member that joined the EU after 2004” (Popescu and Voiculescu 2020, 1; Falk and Hagsten 2017, 3). Another change was the fact that not only cities within the territory of the EU could become ECoCs – Istanbul in 2010 and Novi Sad in 2022. In this sense, researcher Kiran Klaus Patel notes that cultural policy increasingly becomes “a tool of post-industrial urban renewal” (Patel 2013, 544).

For the year 2021, bids were invited from cities in Romania, Greece and an EU candidate country (Pavel and Jucu 2019, 13). Initially, Timișoara shared the title for 2021 with Novi Sad (Serbia) and Elefsina (Greece), but after the European Commission's decision in December 2020, the city will now share the title with Elefsina (Greece) and Veszprém (Hungary). Awarding the EcoC title to Timișoara and Novi Sad for 2021 represented a premiere in the history of the EcoC programme: it was for the first time “when two cities (...) located at a short geographical distance (only 146 km) were designated the title” (Rădoi 2020, 2). “These two cities are twinned cities, part of the same historical region (Banat region) and part of the same euro region (Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa DKMT)” (Rădoi 2020, 2). In the perspective of culture being a driving force of economic cooperation, this decision to award the title to two neighbouring cities came as a benefic opportunity to strengthen the economic collaboration between the two states. Besides, the projects for the EcoC title aim to restructure the cultural infrastructure for the former historical Banat region (Rădoi 2020, 9). The reprogramming of the title appointed Novi Sad for 2022, but that change does not necessarily imply that the partnerships could not continue – the format of this collaboration however, is not known at this date.

For the ECoC title in Timișoara, the programme adopts three main coordinates: people, places and connections; and the title is regarded as a process rather than an event (Bid book 2016, 20). There are three phases to the implementation of the project that relate to audience involvement: engagement, participation and co-creation, and outreach (Bid book 2016, 7). The programme proposes to engage the entire Banat region, by taking a cross-border approach and establish connections with Serbia and Hungary, both of which will be hosting ECoCs in 2022 respectively 2023, establishing a landscape around the main rivers of the region Danube-Criș-Mureș-Tisza (Bid book 2016, 5).

“In general, ECoC host cities rely on public funds to create new cultural venues or extend transport infrastructure, for instance” (Falk and Hagsten 2017, 3). On top of this, there are funds accessed to develop the cultural infrastructure. Formally, there are three main funders of the ECoC programme in Timișoara: the Municipality of Timișoara, the Timiș County Council, and the Ministry of Culture; and what is more, the Bid book mentions for each component of the budget the source of financing (Bid book 2016, 72, 79, 81, 85). As part of the legacy strategy, the Bid book recommends that a Department for Culture and a Centre for Cultural Projects (Centrul de Proiecte - Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2021)

are established to ensure the implementation of cultural projects beyond the ECoC year (Bid book 2016, 9).

When it comes to implementing the project, an association was founded in 2011 – Association Timișoara European Capital of Culture – at the initiative of a significant number of local cultural associations, public institutions including the Municipality and the County Council, private enterprises, and private individuals (The Association’s Status 2011, 1-8). The association is headed by a Supervisory Board which has a crucial role in ensuring the efficient functioning of the Association: “oversees the progress of the TM2021 Programme delivery, and also supports, advises, mediates and represents the project according to the needs of the Executive Director” (Bid book 2016, 86), and is formed of eight members.

### **2.3 Academic Literature on European Capitals of Culture**

Much has been written on the subject of ECoCs, “the most established and recognized EU cultural initiative” (Patel 2013, 539). This study focuses on multiple aspects of a European Capital of Culture: audiences, entrepreneurship and the influence that transition economies have on the event. There is a lot of literature focusing on the success of ECoCs defined through economical concepts (Steiner et al. 2015, 375), but also perspectives of urban and regional development. Recently there has also been some attention directed towards less tangible features such as collaboration and networks. There is a multitude of factors which come at play within such big events, so an ample perspective is needed to comprise as much of the social reality as possible.

The study carried out by Steiner et al. aims its attention at the life satisfaction generated by ECoC programmes. The findings of the study point towards a generally negative effect over the wellbeing of the local population due to public transport disruptions, overcrowding, increase in housing prices, and a deepening in the division among residents (Steiner et al. 2015, 374, 375, 384). On the other hand, the title did incentivize the creation of jobs, and an increase in wages, as well as “substantial improvements of public spaces and public transportation systems” and urban renewal (Steiner et al. 2015, 375). On top of these, there is undeniably the added value that cultural programmes bring within a community, but this point was not quantified by the study in cause. The authors compare these life quality benefits to the lifestyle drawback, but also to the growth in GDP per capita to complete their argument. The authors show that there is only a 0.3% difference between the growth of GDP

per capita in regions hosting ECoCs compared to the ones which do not (Steiner et al. 2015, 378).

Classically, the approach towards mega-events such as ECoCs in academic literature has been that of perceiving them “as strategic tools for local and regional development”, in the sense that the benefits of hosting such manifestations is “often related to material and financial returns” (Evans 2011; Hall 2006; Mills and Rosentraub 2013 qtd in Németh 2017, 151). However, in a 2017 study Agnes Németh focuses on the underrepresented stakeholder networks and inter-organizational relationships, pointing out that it is equally important to regard their legacy also in terms of community strengthening and the establishment of social infrastructures (Németh 2017, 151). The author notices that “the bulk of relevant literature does not explicitly test the claim that networks are a better way to govern or that they are more efficient than hierarchies or other alternative means of organisation” (Németh 2017, 151). However, they may foster innovation and sustainability as important consequences of network governance (Németh 2017, 151).

Immler and Sakkers published a study in 2014 assessing the way in which the concept of the European Dimension in various Bid books was employed. The authors pointed out that while the initial idea behind ECoC was to “stimulate European awareness in order to support political unification,” the outcome was that local problems were solved and the international image of the city boosted (Immler and Sakkers 2014, 4). Even if since 2006 new guidelines were released emphasizing the importance of European dimension, the concept was still ambiguously treated throughout applications, even in the case of winning titles (Immler and Sakkers 2014, 1). One of the conclusions that the authors drew was that the programme evolved into something it was not intended to be. In other words, the ECoC concept adapted to the needs and demands of its cities, instead of “imposing a prefigured model of urban cultural policy” (Immler and Sakkers 2014, 5). This may stand as proof of how decentralized the ECoC initiative is, which is not to be necessarily regarded as a negative aspect.

Nonetheless, “in expanding the role of experts, the European Commission has recently developed a subtle technique of governmentality,” identified by Kiran Klaus Patel as “integration by interpellation”, a concept inspired by Louis Althusser (Patel 2013, 539).

However, the cities of ECoC are varied, as the study of Nataša Urbančíková revealed. The clusters that the author identified include: European Cultural metropolis, business and leisure centre, fully-fledged centre, large post-industrial city, smaller city with historical past, second-tier regional centre, bigger cultural and education centre, smaller attractive cultural

centre (Urbančíková 2018, 52). The success of an ECoC programme depends on multiple factors, and since there are so many typologies and particularities, the study of Urbančíková showing only a perspective of the matter, there is no set blueprint for how success can be achieved. The chance that Timișoara has at creating a success story can only be drawn from its programme, its aims, and the socio-economic context in which the city finds itself in. That is why concepts like audience engagement and development, along with entrepreneurship are key to drafting and understanding the changes occurring in the cultural programme of the ECoC.

Managing such a big event at a European level does not come without its challenges, and the academic literature has been vigilant to notice and study these obstacles and how to overcome them. These include strategies ranging from “planning, promotion, developing and linking culture with tourism” (Popescu and Voiculescu 2020, 2). Generally, the preparation phase of ECoC projects is “especially full of conflicts” (Németh 2015, 15). It is during the beginning stages that the public opinion is “most critical”, but researchers stress that initial negative attitudes are most often rooted in “insufficient information”, “lack of transparency in spending”, and the “exclusion of certain groups from planning”, while later such attitudes are due to “failures in implementation or from any inconsistency in management” (Németh 2015, 15). Some examples of these situations were identified by the literature to be Tallinn 2011, Košice 2013, Pilzeň 2015, or Pécs 2010.

Conflicts are problematic because they often hinder decision-making or cause long-lasting tensions between parties (Németh 2015, 5). There is however a role and a meaning to conflict, in terms that it could prove to be a driving force, especially in classical sociological theory: “conflicts can strengthen solidarity and group consciousness or can provide a basis for innovation” (Németh 2015, 5). Since the 1950s, sociologist Lewis Coser argued that “no group can be entirely harmonious, for then it would lack process and structure” (Coser 1956, qtd. in Németh 2015, 17). As a result, the two main social processes taking place are association and cooperation on the one hand, or dissociation and conflict (Németh 2015, 17). What becomes determinant in how conflicts are settled, and whether they are productive or counter-productive to the success of the event, depends on “the wider socio-cultural and political atmosphere” (Németh 2015, 17). And in this sense, ECoC projects can become a suitable test-ground for democracies, as was the case in Pécs in 2010: showing symptoms of the political culture of a society/country still ‘in transition’ and a relatively new ‘EU-ropenized’ state (Németh 2015, 19). More than ten years later, and in exceptional pandemic

induced circumstances, Timișoara becomes a testing ground for cultural policy formulation and implementation in a democratic manner.

#### **2.4 Audiences**

In the framework of ECoCs, participation is a key component, in that culture is not only an object to consume, but an opportunity for cocreation and cooperation. Participation is understood to be manifested in “both cultural life and decision-making” (Németh 2015, 8). The relevance of the locals’ engagement with the project resides in the legacy that an ECoC will leave a city: “local inhabitants have to play a significant role in the assurance of local cultural life following the ECOC year” (Németh 2015, 9).

In the final report of a study from 2017 – “Audience Development – How to place audiences at the centre of cultural organisations” - a group of authors and experts supported by the European Commission indexed a great amount of academic literature on the subject, analysed 30 case studies from 17 European countries, and created two guide books for cultural organizations. First, it is paramount to understand that when working with the concept of Audience development (AD), one also refers to democratization, access, participation, co-creation, organizational innovation, leadership and policies (Bollo et al. 2017, 7). It is thus a complex concept which encapsulates multiple perspectives on organizational and institutional approaches in the field of culture. All these practices put together by the study reflect steps towards “a more audience-centric organization” (Bollo et al. 2017, 8). This compound of concepts, approaches and practices are relevant for Timișoara’s 2023 ECoC title, because in their programme it was clearly stated that “the overall strategy of the bid is audience development” (Bid book 2016, 96), and the Covid-19 pandemic may interfere with these ambitions.

What the cited study made clear from the beginning was to differentiate between types of audiences: audience by habit (usual attendees for whom access barriers are easily overcome) audience by choice (participation is not a habit and it is usually hindered by financial and opportunities reasons), and audiences by surprise (people hard to reach, indifferent, or hostile); keeping in mind that these categories are not clear cut, but rather fluid (Bollo et al. 2017, 10). The main objectives that the study identified are centralized around widening, diversifying and deepening the cultural experiences, for each of the audience categories identified (Bollo et al. 2017, 14). And each of these objectives can be put into practice through four strategy trajectories: place, the digital space, capacity building and co-



creation (Bollo et al. 2017, 15). The ECoC programme of Timișoara already has some such strategies put into place (for instance the *Power Station* element of the ECoC programme is specifically built to only build local cultural capacity).

The study pointed out, almost prophetically, that “the cultural sector operates in a period of seismic shifts” (Bollo et al. 2017, 49). The silver lining in this period of change speed up by the global pandemic is that “wide social transformations and pervasive digital ecosystems impact on the way people produce and participate in culture” (Bollo et al. 2017, 49). At a programming and policy level this could be a period of changing the paradigm in which cultural organisations and institutions function by increasing the pace, at all levels, including the cultural programme of an ECoC such as Timișoara.

However, for participation to culture to take place, *access to culture* has to be ensured. In a publication of the European Commission, the concept is defined as “the opportunity to benefit from cultural offer” from perspectives of financial means, public spending, social integration, skills and education, geographical and social isolation, minority rights, cultural rights and freedom of expression, all of which can turn into barriers to cultural consumption (Access to Culture 2017, 1).

The study also identified the framework in which *cultural participation* can manifest: it “implies the consumption of various cultural goods and services by the public at large” (Access to Culture 2017, 1). Although the two concepts are closely linked, they are different. Participation has two dimensions, active or passive, and it is based on these that access is determined (Access to Culture 2017, 9). This differentiation is relevant in the context of Covid-19 which has accelerated the increase in usage of the digital tools, which can from some perspectives, enlarge cultural participation of certain groups and at the same time drastically limit the access of others. Some of these limits include and are not limited to a “lack of internet infrastructure, ICT equipment or digital skills and competences, or a low level of digitisation of resources” (Access to Culture 2017, 24). The publication draws attention to the fact that it is outside of the direct competence of the EU to get directly involved in such matters, and it is rather a responsibility of the Member States to facilitate access to culture (Access to Culture 2017, 1).

The benefits of access to culture range from individual to community levels and extend beyond the success of an ECoC project: “access to culture in a large extent changes the community attitudes, while improving the mental state of the population, which in turn increases personal motivation and self-esteem of the individual, thereby improving

sociability, power and involvement of the settlement and, therefore, their standard of living” (Stoica and Chirodea 2015, 2). There is thus a connection between access of people to cultures, which implies a greater degree of participation to culture, and the economic development of an area. This is thus one of the mechanisms through which culture becomes an economic driver and the ECoC programme a catalyser of the process.

There is value in the active participation of citizens in culture: Urbančíková mentions that it results in “the reinforcement of social cohesion and progress in intercultural dialogue” (Urbančíková 2018, 46). The change in paradigm of the ECoC from exclusively a cultural approach to presenting arts and culture “as an economic driving force” is what in part supported the change for audiences to participate in the co-creation of the events in the programme instead of only being consumers (Urbančíková 2018, 46). While having inclusion as a primary aim, volunteer programmes “allow for the highest level of participation”, and thus serve as “good indicators of social mobilization” (Németh 2015, 11). This is just one example of how audiences can be included in the programme as cocreators, and thus strengthening the community.

The shape which audience inclusion and participation takes within an ECoC is highly dependent on “the management of the projects, that is, around their different concepts about inclusion” (Németh 2015, 9). And when it comes to management, it also comes to the political culture and level of democracy of a space and what are the management practices specific there. The case of Pécs reveals a series of struggles of a transition country with regards to how it relates to its civil society and implicitly, its audience: “the civil society’s wish to participate was rather neglected and they were not provided with any financial resources to take part or given any possibility to shape the programme” (Németh 2015, 10). It is not a mercantile view, but projects at a European level cannot be delivered without any sort of financial support. The author also signals in this case that after the title was won, the project became too political, a view which transpired from the interviews of this present study, as it will be revealed in the analysis and discussion section on transition economies.

## **2.5 Entrepreneurship**

While audiences can play a more active role in the cultural programmes, there is another dimension that contemporary cultural programmes need to address: entrepreneurship. There is still quite some ambiguity related to the concept and practices of cultural entrepreneurship, so point out Pyykkönen and Stavrum in their study on “Discourses on Entrepreneurship in

Nordic Cultural Policy.” The authors take Finland and Norway as case studies and show how entrepreneurship “is established and used as a concept in cultural policy discourses” (Pyykkönen and Stavrum 2017, 108). The authors identify the value of cultural entrepreneurship to be that it is beneficial for innovations, that it increases economic practices in culture and creates new markets, and that it increases general well-being through the creation of new jobs, the latter which could be a benefit in itself (Pyykkönen and Stavrum 2017, 113). Thus, it is also an attitude that can be integrated in multiple forms of practice.

In the case of artists, the authors introduce a new concept, that of *intrapreneurship*, defined as “the entrepreneurial spirit as a personal life ethos,” pointing out that the qualities of an entrepreneur do not only reside in business-oriented skills (Pyykkönen and Stavrum 2017, 110). The freedom that comes with the entrepreneurial status may lead to ambiguity, but also point to one of the necessary skills of the entrepreneur: time management. The authors do not fail to mention that “it is not laissez-faire freedom but regulated and conducted freedom” (Pyykkönen and Stavrum 2017, 115).

Thus, all the elements that construct the entrepreneurial ethos are not created and naturalized overnight, and that is why there is an urge from the side of the cultural policy to include entrepreneurship as part of the education of artists (Pyykkönen and Stavrum 2017, 116). The entrepreneurial dimension needs to be cultivated through long-term programmes, and an ECoC title could be a proper occasion for it to manifest through capacity building and encouraging the independent cultural sector.

The EcoC programmes, however, do not always succeed in fostering appropriate environments for the local entrepreneurs, although it was recognized that “the success of the ECO programme is based on the local residents as active (performing) participants of the cultural events” (Németh 2015, 8). That entails turning the audience from only a consumer to a cocreator, and not only from a liminal perspective, but putting them in the spotlight, and focusing on the networks that they could create. It involves relying on the local resources, and thus empowering and professionalizing the local actors, who will then carry on the legacy.

Generally, the literature suggests that “Europe is perceived as lagging in both the rate of business start-ups and the rate of survival and growth of SMEs” (small and medium-sized enterprises), and the reason for it is “a lack of effective culture, social and/or human capital rather than a lack of innovative capacity” (Uhlener et al. 2011, 2). Author Peter Campbell shows in his study of ECoC Liverpool in 2008 that there was little done to support the local

entrepreneurs during the preparations and the unwinding of the ECoC title in Liverpool. While the programme aimed to create 13,200 new jobs in the cultural and creative industries, and to foster “an attractive environment for cultural businesses and creative people”, it only “partially succeeded” (Campbell 2011, 511, 519). This could however serve as a lesson for future ECoCs, as the question whether the ECoC concept should be concerned about creative industries becomes more pressing today. In terms of rhetoric, the author points out that there is no shortage of it: culture is seen as an economic tool which is active through the creative industries (Campbell 2011, 517). However, “local creative production and local creative industries are in fact a marginal agenda for the main ECoC programme” (Campbell 2011, 516). The question is, and this study makes efforts to elucidate it, is whether the Covid-19 pandemic did already, or should at least direct the focus towards protecting and encourage the prosperity of the local creative industries.

On this two-way street, also in the case of Liverpool, there was initiative from the private sector: “enterprises were aware of the ECoC designation” (Andriopoulos 2014, 193). It is noted that “there was ample optimism about the economic turnaround of Liverpool” with the “major infrastructure investments in the city (...) [being] identified as [a] more significant factor” (Andriopoulos 2014, 194). It is significant for the legacy of an ECoC to employ and develop local resources, so that in the years after the event these operators would continue their activity.

More than the implication of the locals, it is significant to foster some degree of collaboration and networking between them, because there are many benefits to these connections. One of them is innovation, which is related to creating connections with others, and thus possibly inter-disciplinary endeavours: “arranging an ECoC required the formation of relations among actors; some actors have to establish new relations while others continue familiar relationships but with new tasks” (Bergsgard et al. 2010, 354). Thus, behind all the figures that measure the success of an ECoC in numbers, there is collaboration, cooperation and networking at a local level, which are the intangible long-term benefits that such a project could bring about. And beyond the perspective of the ECoC, some implications of networking include “analysing knowledge spillover between organisations and how organisations assimilate that knowledge in order to innovate” (Bergsgard et al. 2010, 354). That being said, within networking there is a constant exchange between the invested parties that benefits their activity both individually and as a community.

## 2.6 Transition Economies

After 1989 and the anti-communist revolutions across Eastern Europe, the states in the former communist block were catapulted into a transition process of the society on multiple layers, without a blueprint. This involved a cultural transition, but also a transition of governance and of how policies are drafted. For clarity, through transition it is meant the process occurring “when a social system, is deeply and radically transformed, so as to acquire characteristics which make it distinctly different from the one that existed at the beginning of the transition process” (Švob-Đokić a 2004, 9). Generally speaking, *transition* is a term widely accepted in literature today to refer to the “political, economic, and social change typical of the contemporary post-socialist societies” (Švob-Đokić a 2004, 9).

The academic literature identifies two generations of reforms typical of these Eastern European states. The first one focusing on the hard infrastructure of society: political extinction of socialist institutions, privatization of enterprises, democracy and liberalization, which had violent and chaotic manifestations in some areas, resulted in a demographic decline and social destruction through the loss of values, both human and cultural (Švob-Đokić b 2004, 2). The second generation of reforms focused on matters of “good governance” which manifested in efforts to eradicate corruption, ensuring the independence of the judiciary system and of the monetary and fiscal institutions (Švob-Đokić b 2004, 2).

At a cultural level, all states experienced a worsening of their state during the first generation of reforms, that meant at the national level a fall of cultural institutions, a lack of financing and a loss of professionalism, lack of self-criticism, and even the undermining of minority cultures in some cases (Švob-Đokić b 2004, 2-3). The second phase, extending to the present moment, involved an awakening and rationalization of the situation: cultural heritage came in focus, and a tendency to identify with European values manifested through trade, cooperation, networking, partnerships and consultancy (Švob-Đokić b 2004, 3). The transition of the post-socialist states happened without any model, and thus the process differed across countries, but a common thread between them is that culture is generally both an “actor and a mediator of social change” (Švob-Đokić b 2004, 3): culture could not have waited for the society to reform itself, but it engaged in a parallel process. This entails that while the entire society was reforming itself, culture acted as a mirror of that process and had to develop subsistence strategies of its own. The cultural practice in this space, especially the independent sector, developed a guerrilla nature, where it learned not to depend on public financing to survive.

Another significant discussion in the context of transition states is the state of the public cultural sector. To define the term, the public cultural sector represents the capability of a community to get different people into a common space of dialogue and cooperation by means of all forms of culture, i.e., patrician, plebeian or alternative (Katunarić 2004, 20). The concept of “public”, on the other hand implies a state-subsidized culture, which in the communist era was the only alternative. Capitalism brought however a liberalization in this sense through privatization, commercialization and the third sector independence (Katunarić 2004, 21). Even in capitalism however there is need for subsidies in culture because not all sectors of culture can sustain themselves from the market, but not so much as to speak of a “market failure”.

However, upon the occasion of the Covid-19 global pandemic, there was suddenly a need for the state to heavily intervene and offer financial support to the cultural sector, but not exclusively. And in this case the meaning of market failure as is understood by author Vjeron Katunarić is manifested: “in the case of market failure it would be necessary for the state to intervene in favour of all contenders whose capabilities are approximately equal, but who cannot afford to obtain some appropriate funding outside the public sector” (Katunarić 2004, 22). There was a physical impossibility for the cultural market to function in quasi-normal conditions, and across the globe this translated into a partial or total halt of the activity of cultural operators and the need to support them. Even though there has been a migration towards the digital space, monetization options were not always available, and even if and when they were, these could not be a substitute.

The ways in which states responded to this need of the cultural sector varied greatly across the European continent. A recent study carried out by a group of academics observes the manner in which smaller and medium-sized countries responded to the Covid-19 generated crisis in the cultural sector: the Czech Republic, The Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Switzerland (Betzler et al. 2020). Their study extends to observing the effects that these measures could have upon the cultural and creative organizations and workers. Each country had its own cultural, economic and social context that influenced to some degree its early measures and policies a fact also taken into account. The conclusions drawn from their study was that “COVID-19 is likely to threaten cultural (bottom-up) innovation and the diversity of cultural expressions, strengthen winner-take-all structures in cultural markets, and install new gentrification processes” (Betzler et al. 2020, 15). Having the entire cultural sector depending on the state to finance it may pose serious questions of freedom of

expression even in democratic contexts, from the perspective of the type of artistic expression at stake, and of the legal framework in which this is carried out. Thus, many cultural expressions in liminal spaces face extinction.

This added layer of uncertainty comes in an already ambiguous medium: the authors note that cultural production was already “characterized by challenging labour market conditions, such as forced self-employment, uncertainty and volatility of work” (Betzler et al. 2020, 15). Romania had its own particularities as a case study in this matter – it is sufficing to mention, as it is not the object of this study, that the Coronavirus relief measures for the cultural sector were introduced, and delayed in a characteristically ambiguous and chaotic manner (Tănăsescu, January and April 2021). From this perspective of the added insecurity of the cultural sector, the ECoC programme in Timișoara could present itself as an opportunity for cultural entrepreneurs to rebuild and secure some continuity in their activity.

The post-communist state has had a troubled relationship with its cultural sector even before the pandemic, and these struggles become evident on the occasion of ECoC programmes. It is noted in literature that “the political turmoil in postcommunist countries affected the entire process of achieving ECoC goals with governance playing a crucial role” (Popescu and Voiculescu 2020, 1). It is shown in plenty of literature that when it comes to governance, democracy put in motion some changes “from state-centric to society-centric governance, in which the network of participants is fluid and increasingly informal” (Swyngedouw et al. 2003, Amin 2004, Allen and Cochrane 2009, 2010 qtd. in Németh 2015, 3). This challenges the political culture of post-soviet and other postcommunist spaces in Europe which has a tradition of dirigisme, centralization, hierarchy, and authority.

## **2.7 Theoretical Framework**

The three main coordinates of this research are audiences, entrepreneurship and transition economies, to which the researcher added another one referring to the technicalities of ECoCs. Appendix A offers a clear break-down of these within the interview framework. In the case of audiences, the concepts that guide the interview questions are access to culture, participation to culture, audience engagement, audience development, audience enlargement multiculturalism and ECoC legacy. These concepts partly originate in the literature, and partly in the purposes and aims of Timișoara’s ECoC programme for which audience development was a focal point. As far as entrepreneurship goes, this concept seeks to examine practices of local entrepreneurship in Timișoara and on the one hand the effects that

the pandemic has had on this sector, and on the other how can the ECoC programme be a catalyser for its revival. It takes into consideration innovation, collaboration, networking, but also mission drift. A concept which transformed almost into an umbrella idea because of its ubiquity is the transition economy. This is a complex point that relates to politics, management, governance, corruption, cultural policy, and a concept termed “financials” in the appendix – this concerns funding, cash flow, sponsorship, and other matters related to the subject. Finally, an ECoC dimension is introduced, partly as a bridge between the other concepts, and partly to better understand how the project in its entirety is viewed from the local perspective. There are constant bridges and connections between these concepts that the researcher was focusing on and that the interviewees made during the discussions. These are not clear-cut themes, but they morph into each other and influence one another.



### **3 Methodology**

As one of this research's aims is to study the dynamic and collaboration patterns between the various actors at all levels in a period of extreme change and uncertainty, the most suitable research strategy is a qualitative one. The tools used in managing and operationalizing the information gathered is directed towards interpretation, induction, rationalization of uncovered collaborations, dynamics and networks within the implementation of the ECoC programme. The strings which determine action are not always visible from the outside, so that is why qualitative inquiry is needed to capture the links and collaborations, dependencies and tensions within the programming and implementation of the ECoC programme. Alan Bryman notes that "qualitative research tends to be concerned with words rather than with numbers" (2012, 380), meaning that it seeks to understand social realities that cannot always be revealed by numbers. The inductive approach that this sort of research requires is due to the need for interpretation of the material gathered by the researcher in the quest for revealing truths about certain bits of the world.

In terms of research design, this study combines a cross-sectional design within a case study. Studying European Capitals of Culture is an extensive endeavour which requires focusing on specific cases because there are numerous factors which individualize each of these cities, from local customs and communities, to the economic opportunities and larger social contexts (such as global pandemics). Focusing on a case study allows a "detailed and intensive analysis of a single case" (Bryman 2012, 66). The choice to study Timișoara 2021/2023 offers another interesting layer – that of a transition economy. And within this case study, a cross-sectional approach is taken: Bryman notes that with cross-sectional designs the interest resides in variation (2012, 59), and for the chosen case of Timișoara, there is an interest to approach various stakeholders in the process of programme reconfiguration. Being a European Capital of Culture is a joint effort of multiple institutions and individuals at various levels, from international to national, regional, and local. There is an intricate web of collaboration and reliance that cannot be revealed by studying one association only. A wider view is needed in order to comprehensively understand the process. Besides, Timișoara is currently engaged in a process of redesigning its ECoC programme, thus the researcher was bound by time. This cross-sectional study captures the effervescence of the first quarter and a half of 2021 is the time frame in which this study proposes itself to navigate. Surely, there is attention paid to what happened in the past that determines the structure of the cultural community today, and a perspective oriented toward the 2023 horizon, but the information available is limited to this timeframe.

There are two methods that this research focused on, and they rely and support each other: observation and interviews. Alan Bryman points out that the two methods work harmoniously with one another, and are frequently employed in qualitative research (Bryman 2012, 383). First, the method of observation evolved from a form of participant observation to structured observation. It was through the method of participant observation that the researcher was introduced to the case study, developed a sense of the dynamics, and appreciated the value of studying the case more in depth. Informal interviews and discussions were carried out in the preliminary phase of this study in order to assess the opportunity that such an inquiry could offer to the academic discussion. After the preliminary phase, a structured observation method was adopted: due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic, many discussions and developments of the cultural programme are carried out in online mediums, and due to the public importance of the subject, most of the significant arrangements are reported by the press (local and national). The first two quarters of 2021 represent a very dynamic period where the actors involved in the implementation and design of the cultural programme of the ECoC carried out discussions and debates. These pieces of information were documented and archived by the researcher as reports, photographs, or audio files. All information gathered during the desk research represents public information and can be accessed online – thus there is no question of ethics violation, or doubtful integrity of the research process.

The second method of study ties in with the first in that it provides the significant persons who could be interviewed. The criteria in selecting the interviewees are closely related to the observation period: the selected actors spoke on behalf of significant institutions or as individuals – artists, producers or cultural managers, often with more than one background – who are part of the programme restructuring conversation or not, and part of the ECoC programme or not. An ECoC title is an event that affects the entire cultural community, so it is significant to seek to acquire a view as comprehensive as possible. Another source for the selection of interviewees is represented by the Bid book document which mentions by name people and institutions which are significant to the implementation of the ECoC programme.

The selection of people took place according to their relevance to the topics discussed in the present study. Given that the main points of inquiry are audiences, entrepreneurship, and the profile of a transition economy, the chosen interviewees are people who are connected at various extents to these matters. The researcher did not limit the interviews to

only one topic, but instead attempted at grasping each of these topics through the lenses of the interviewee. The expected result is that of a layered view of the matter through various perspectives on both sides of the barricade – that of the entrepreneur and that of the administration.

As a method for sampling the relevant respondents, the researcher employed a snowball strategy: “a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research” (Bryman 2012, 418). This strategy was useful as a way to reach new interviewees, or to confirm a previous selection, but it proved to also be a somewhat limitation to the study, as it required a longer period of embeddedness of the researcher in the social context. Another strategy to gain access was what researchers label as “hanging around”, so that by making oneself integrate physically in the space, there is a heightened possibility for interviewees to show availability to discuss (Bryman 2012, 438).

The interviews were carried out both on digital platforms and in person, and were recorded and transcribed. Both the recordings and the transcriptions are available in the researcher’s archive. The participants were offered the option to have their identities protected partially or entirely. Some disclosure of their position within the discussion of the restructuring of the ECoC programme is valuable in ensuring the value and validity of some points, but the priority is that the integrity of the participants is ensured. An overview of the interviewees can be found in Appendix C.

The interviews (fourteen in total) have a semi-structured format, allowing for each interviewee to elaborate most on the areas of discussion with which they are most familiar with, thus strengthening their point of view (as artists or institution representatives – public or private, for instance). Bryman defines semi-structured interviews as “a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of questions” and includes as features the ability to further focus on a topic “in response to what are seen as significant replies” (Bryman 2012, 255).

The interview guide is formulated as to open topics of discussion. That is why there is an appearance that many questions were formulated as yes/no questions but this was fully intentionally and done with a scope to open the discussion, and depending on the interviewee’s area of expertise or point of view the discussion would thus have space to mould accordingly. Bryman points out that “the extent to which qualitative researchers ask

‘why?’ questions is frequently understated” (Bryman 2012, 401), and this was the case as well for the current research.

The starting point for the interviews represented the Bid book document, because in changing the cultural programme this document also constituted the starting point of the discussion: what was planned and what can still be carried out. The concepts of audience and entrepreneurship were central to the interviews, following that the dimension of the transition economy to be inquired upon from a more delicate perspective, to avoid enforcing certain worldviews or practices. The questions were formulated so that every interviewee can lead the discussion into an area that they are most knowledgeable about. Their responses were then centralized and operationalized by coding: the researcher aimed to uncover methods of work, customs of collaboration, problem solving, and needs identification, on the one hand, to identify the processual dimension of the research question. On the other hand, there was also a focus on context: what sort of programme can still be feasible in a pandemic future.

The validity and reliability of this method reside in that all subjects of this study were interviewed according to a reciprocated model. The discussion within the academic field of the relevance of these concepts in the context of qualitative research is noteworthy in this case: because qualitative research implies an in-depth study of a certain group and thus involves a degree of uniqueness, the transferability of the method is not as significant as in the case of quantitative studies (Bryman 2012, 390-392). Even though validity is more loose in qualitative research – because it refers to whether “you are observing, identifying, or “measuring” what you say you are” (Mason 1996: 24, qtd. in Bryman 2012, 389-390) – it does not imply that there is a lower significance bore by this form of research. Within the framework of qualitative research, it is noted by the literature a differentiation between external or internal validity and reliability. And the internal validity is demonstrated by “the prolonged participation in the social life of a group over a long period of time” because it “allows the researcher to ensure a high level of congruence between concepts and observations” (Bryman 2012, 392). The current study focused more on depth rather than breadth, although that could be interpreted as a shortcoming of the research, because there are many more voices in the cultural ecosystem of Timișoara that are valuable to be heard.

There were two categories of interviewees, and subsequently two interview guides: the cultural operators and the administration. The first group, that of cultural operators, was comprised of artists, entrepreneurs working as subcontractors for various cultural projects, small organizations which apply for and rely on funding, be it public or private. The latter are

included in a discussion about entrepreneurship as well, because even in the case of funding, there is a degree of competition, even if the beneficiaries of the *products* are not the ones directly paying for it – but that is part of the paradoxes of culture. The discussion with these interviewees was as well oriented towards exploring the entrepreneurship concept, and the opportunities offered in this sense by the ECoC programme. This segment constituted the majority of interviewees.

	Audiences	Entrepreneurship	Transition state
Cultural operators			
Administration			

Figure 1. The elements of the research design

On the other hand, the administration was significant to be included in the study, because of their external views, or perspectives that are too close to the subject. It is absolutely significant to seek to gather a perspective from the other side of the barricade, the one which is involved in the decision-making process related to the ECoC title. However, there have been difficulties in accessing representatives of this category for various reasons, and as a result only three interviewees from this category contributed to the study.

After coding the interviews, the material was interpreted based on the theoretical framework, with the researcher paying attention to words, attitudes and themes, and as analysis perspective the researcher employed conversation analysis. Conversation analysis is employed because of its indexicality and reflexivity dimensions. By the former it is understood that words are interpreted in the context they are used in, and by the latter it is meant that “spoken words are constitutive of the social world in which they are located” in the sense that they are not only representative of the social world, but create it (Bryman 2012, 523). This attitude is enforced by the commitment to “viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people that they study” and that “the social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections on the social world” (Bryman 2012, 399).

In interpreting the interviews, the researcher allowed room for nuances – there was often limited consensus over how initiatives should specifically be carried out, but in exchange there was overlap in values and ideas, more abstract concepts. “Blumer (1954)

argued stridently against the use of definitive concepts in social research” (Bryman 2012, 388). Thus, nuances are allowed, a practice carried out in interviews as well: for instance, many people talked about collaboration, but the researcher did not set out on a quest to discover what precisely is meant by that. There is a danger in such a practice though: “it is not at all clear how far a very general formulation of a concept can be regarded as a useful guide to empirical enquiry” (Bryman 2012, 388). However, for the scope of this research this does not weigh much because results, and their implementations are not in focus, but the points of reference in the reorganization of the forces around the title. This processual aspect is understood as “a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context” (Bryman 2012, 402). This is one of the reasons why this study directs so much attention to detail, to uncovering the dynamics of the situations which led to this moment’s configuration. This means that behaviours, attitudes and viewpoints are understood in the context that they emerged, and ultimately came to shape.

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Observation

A structured process of observation for the purpose of this study debuted in the beginning of February 2021 with a live meeting transmitted on a social media platform hosted by the municipality of Timișoara. Upon the occasion the mayor of Timișoara presented a concept for the restructuring of the ECoC title, named *Restart Timișoara 2023* (Cultural meeting 12 February 2021). Ever since, in the weekly press conference the mayor announces the steps forward that have been made in regards to the restructuring process.

Currently, until the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2021, the central node in the implementation plan, the TM2021 Association is not functional because there are not enough members in the Supervisory Board and thus decisions cannot be made and the activity of the Association cannot move forward. The programme for the title is thus blocked as well (Weekly Press Conference 18 May 2021). The municipality and the County Council have made visits to the Ministry of Culture in order to appoint a special representative within the Supervisory Board. The decision has not been made until the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2021.

At the same time, the municipality employed a group of cultural consultants, led by the former ministry of culture at the time when Timișoara won the ECoC title in September 2016, to establish a better functionality of the cultural programme, develop a promotion strategy, and appoint an artistic directorship formed of multiple curators for various types of cultural interventions (Weekly Press Conference 18 May 2021).

Recently, in the second half of May 2021 a Centre for Projects was founded, which was part of the Bid book strategy as well in regards to building the legacy of the project (Bid book 2016, 9). In elaborating the rules and regulations, the Municipality initiated a transparent process through which all cultural operators in the city were invited to contribute with suggestions and improvements (Public consultation – Primaria Municipiului Timișoara, 2021). This was followed by an online meeting where all these suggestions were discussed. The researcher was present at this meeting as an observer of the process, but also of the dynamics in the relations between the cultural operators.

The conclusion that could have been drawn from the observation phase is that there are still structural problems that hinder the planning and implementation of the programme that are independent from the pandemic. Also, the change in the local administration put the project into a faster motion, taking responsibility for implementing steps that were scheduled

to take place at a later date, as part of the legacy – the establishing of the Centre for Projects. In this sense, it is noteworthy that some steps in the project are reshuffled with the aim of ensuring more transparency and equity for all cultural players. According to the meeting in May, the perspective is oriented towards a long-term horizon, with a new guidebook for open calls being established for granting non-refundable funds for cultural initiatives. The involvement of the Ministry of Culture needs to be more visible, and this need can be noticed in the endeavours of the local authorities who make constant efforts in this sense, with the mayor of Timișoara having made frequent trips to Bucharest in attempting to ensure the support of the Ministry both in terms of financial commitments, and with regards to counselling and a presence in the supervisory board.

#### **4.2 The Interviews**

There were fourteen interviews carried out, of which most were in person, with the exception of three which were carried out via online platforms. As a researcher it was fascinating to be able to glance into numerous “cultural bubbles” of the city, each with their audiences, programmes and ways of working. There were converging points of discussion between the respondents, and overall, it was possible to draft an overarching review of how the cultural operators position themselves regarding the ECoC title, its postponement to 2023, and the entire changing process of the programme. Of the fourteen interviewees, eleven were cultural operators, two were representatives of the Association TM2021, former and present, and one was a representative of the Municipality of Timișoara, the latter bringing crucial points of view in gaining clarity, and what had happened beyond what was perceived by the community or the press. Of the eleven cultural operators, six were leaders of cultural independent organizations, covering multiple areas such as education, visual arts, music, or literature. There was a representative of a public cultural institution as well, three artists involved with TM2023 projects, and one cultural operator owning a for profit enterprise in the cultural sector. A detailed overview of the interviews is provided in Appendix C. There were many more invitations sent to local actors of the cultural sector both cultural operators and representatives of the administration, but for various reasons, it was impossible to hold interviews. The discussions, totalling more than 10 hours of recorded material, revealed an unexpected focus rather on the modes of working and implementation of the project so far, all instead of obstacles imposed by the pandemic. However, there was a general consensus among interviewees that the rescheduling of the title was a beneficial decision for the city,



and for the remaining eighteen months until the inauguration of the title something more robust and coherent could be delivered.

### **4.3 On Audiences**

The Covid-19 pandemic has not been a unitary experience for the cultural sector in Romania: while some institutions, organizations and companies were able to keep their doors open with a few exceptions over the past year, others had to halt their activities completely. This course of events significantly influenced their relationship with their audiences. All interviewees mentioned some form of mission drift, in the sense that they were not able to carry out their programmes as planned, and these set of unplanned or uncontrolled changes affected the ways in which audiences are reached and interacted with.

In the case of the cultural operators that were able to carry out their programmes even in the pandemic period, they mentioned despite the added rules and regulations, some projects were still possible to happen (Interviewee A, B, D, E, H). However, issues were reported in terms of engagement – out of commodity people were reluctant to make reservations instead of showing up directly on site, so smaller numbers of visitors were welcomed (Interviewee A, E).

The digital space offered an alternative for most cultural operators that were interviewed, but they also were keen on pointing out that such manifestations could not cover the entire spectre of their activity (Interviewee B, E, H, I, K). While the digital tools have a lot to offer, and facilitate access to new audiences (such as the diaspora, or schools), there was a consensus among the interviewees that the digital cannot be a substitute for culture, although some mentioned that they plan to maintain a hybrid framework (Interviewee A, E, M). Even though in the past year the digital was the main pre-set of many events, with the option for in person as a back-up (Interviewee A), all operators expressed their eagerness to return to the traditional way of delivering their products (especially Interviewee I, for whom the activity came to an almost complete halt). In the perspective of TM2023, the digital nature of the events would on the one hand open up the programme to a wider audience both in terms of geographical location and of the number of attendees, but it would restrict the access of the audiences by surprise, and even by choice in some ways, because it is no longer as facile to attend the cultural events, and it cannot happen by chance. In the perspective of 2023, the operators did express hope for a full in person experience, but also declared their

openness for maintaining a hybrid format to their activities, so that a wider audience can be included (Interviewee A, E, J, M).

Another option for the TM2023 programme to reorient towards is the open public space. It is a medium not unknown to the TM2021 programme (Interviewee J, M). The artists interviewed, involved with such projects, reported having a positive experience in terms of the audience response (Interviewee F, G, L). In the case of the public spaces, the respondents agreed that there is some sort of negotiations regarding bringing forth innovation and more experimental approaches (Interviewee F, G). From the perspective of accessing varied publics, the public space is a viable alternative where cultural encounters in the city can take place, in almost any scenario. Culture manifested in the public space has a heightened degree of visibility to the public, and it is important that even in such places, there is a degree of mediation taking place. The Bid book initially planned for 50% of its activities to take place in the public space: the pandemic has introduced in that equation the online dimension, but a revitalisation of the public space is an option because Timișoara benefits from such resources (Bid book 2016, 67).

For that reason, the cultural mediation, and educational programmes in the city seek to create dialogue and understanding between art and the public. And reports on such projects developed so far were positive (Interviewee A, E). Many cultural operators acknowledged the importance of the way in which the public responds, and there is a consensus in favour of quality over the quantity of events and attendees (Interviewee J). However, it does not necessarily have to be a trade-off between quality and quantity of events – there is another factor to take into account, which is the size of the events.

Given the uncertainty generated by the pandemic, a viable perspective for 2023 would be to organize smaller, yet more numerous events (Interviewee J, M). This could be a more viable option given the ambiguity of the future, but also would give the programmers a chance to orient the activities away from the centre of the city and more towards the neighbourhoods. The pandemic calls for a rescaling of the events, a fact which was agreed with by multiple interviewees, including from the administrative side (Interviewee B, E, H, J, M).

The neighbourhood approach is one of the defining features of the Bidbook, one which takes into consideration the multicultural identity of the city: such as the fact that multiple languages are spoken on the street, from Romanian, Hungarian, German, Romany to

Serbian or even Italian. The diffused approach that the neighbourhood projects would bring could have the potential to be more resilient to any pandemic scenarios, and foster better connections with the more secluded audiences. The multicultural dimension of Timișoara is long-recognized by its citizens – thus a bottom-up sentiment – and the cultural operators of the city are mindful of this feature in elaborating their projects. Multiculturalism is a fact recognized as “a characteristic of immediate reality” in the cultural strategy document of the city (Cultural Strategy of Timișoara 2014, 30), but the issue is that there is an increased percentage of the city’s population – 91% - that does not engage in inter-ethnic cultural manifestations (Cultural Strategy of Timișoara 2014, 30).

From a pandemic perspective there is an opportunity to create more intimate projects, with fewer participants, but deeper connections established among the participants. The big events could be given up in favour of the smaller ones. The imperative here, especially in the case of events targeting co-creation, is recurrence, and constancy (Interviewee J). The aim is to make the community feel like it is part of a bigger movement.

#### **4.4 On Entrepreneurship**

With a few exceptions, most interviewees practice a form of cultural entrepreneurship, and also have strong connections with cultural entrepreneurs in their fields of work. It became crucial then to examine this aspect in the current research, especially because cultural entrepreneurship was one of the most strongly hit by the pandemic forms of activity. For most of them, with the exception of one (Interviewee I), their remunerated activity continued even during the pandemic, even if in altered forms. There were sectors of the cultural scene which could not be put into motion under any pandemic scenario: the spectacle industry. Their reorientation in this case was towards a digital space, but the projects carried out were under a volunteering title (Interviewee I).

For most respondents it was crucial to have a plan, but the pandemic has imposed an unexpected dose of flexibility upon their activity (Interviewee A, B, D, E), and all respondents admitted to having had a mission drift generated by the pandemic. This was generally oriented towards building resources, both material (Interviewee H) and human (Interviewee A), an orientation towards education programmes and knowledge sharing (Interviewee E), and undoubtedly using the digital space not only as a space for promotion, but for performance as well (Interviewee K).

One of the crucial conditions for knowledge sharing is collaboration, and not only with entities that have similar profiles, but the multidisciplinary connections can be of added value. There was an absolute consensus among the interviewees that their collaboration is the key to the success of the ECoC title, but the form which this collaboration could manifest itself was not clear, and the interviews did not set out to explore what it should look like. One interviewee mentioned that this collaboration should take place beyond actions of promoting each other, but in this case, it is difficult to not enter the zone of mission drift for their own organizations (Interviewee K).

Within the framework of the ECoC title, some respondents have admitted that it is inevitable to not collaborate with the programme, but in the past years there have been issues regarding collaborations, openness, communication, financial aspects and general management issues (Interviewee A, C). These aspects have fostered a schism, rather than a cohesion of the local cultural scene (Interviewee C). Another grievance was that the implementing body of the title, the Association TM2021, did not encourage entrepreneurship sufficiently, partly by becoming themselves producers of events, instead of appealing to the local resources (Interviewee A, C). While collaboration seems to be the answer to the success of the title in the entrepreneurs' views, it seems like there is still plenty of space for it to develop.

On the topic of collaboration, there is another aspect involved: sustainability of the sector. It was agreed by the interviewees that one important aspect of sustainability is their collaboration because it would entail a form of renunciation to some form of individualism and create long-term initiatives. And the long-term perspective is something significant to the ECoC efforts as well, when thinking about the legacy it would generate. However, all cultural operators interviewed agreed that their activity does not depend on the ECoC title, and that even if they are not included in the official programme, they still have an agenda with projects of their own.

The precarity of the cultural scene is not an obscure subject however: some respondents acknowledged that they turn to volunteering for their own projects, and sometimes give up on their own fees for the success of the project (Interviewee A). Such practices cannot remain the norm, and if the ECoC title could aid the cultural scene in becoming a more sustainable, predictable and coagulated one, then that could be a marker of success for the project. Some respondents expressed disappointment at the fact that the ECoC

title is not a truthful mirror of the local cultural scene in the sense that it does not represent it in its diversity (Interviewee C, D). The bright side is that there is an organic growth of the cultural scene in Timișoara, that does not depend on the title (Interviewee B, F, D, L). Thus, in that case the title should understand the cultural fibre of the city and foster natural growth.

When mentioning that the success of the title year would entail collaboration, there was added another layer to the discussion. Many initiatives developed and grew since 2016, while others faded out on the local scene. There are plenty more new artists to be discovered and have their voice included in the city's project, as an interviewee mentions (Interviewee D). In this sense, since the cultural ecosystem changed, the ECoC title should adapt to reflect the cultural scene in its diversity, now that it is given the chance (Interviewee A, D, E, J). This is a controversial point however: not all respondents believed that everybody on the cultural scene should be included in the ECoC programme, and some others mentioned legal difficulties in doing so, given that the city won the title based on a programme (Interviewee B, L).

Although novelty is present in the city under the form of emerging initiatives, there is also innovation to be kept in mind, especially because the pandemic has generated a general migration to the digital space, a step for which many were not prepared. Part of the ECoC programme is building Multiplexity – a hub for innovation where creativity would encounter the business and IT community (its status being updated on a regular basis by the Municipality, including at the press conference from 18 May 2021). This project is a significant part of the legacy that is still feasible for the 2023 perspective. This is however an investment in infrastructure, and when it comes to innovative projects and actions, there are some shortcomings, as it is best put by an interviewee, and consensus around this point was expressed (Interviewee E):

“Not enough is said about it unfortunately. There are very few organizations and very few contexts where you can really talk about Innovations, because most of the talk is about money and most of it is a sort of general whining that I understand and it's absolutely justified. That's the main problem. But somehow to get to talking about innovation you have to get past this stage and start dreaming a little bit more to design something bigger.”

#### **4.5 On European Capitals of Culture in General**

When setting out to commence this study, the researcher had little clue as to what was the situation within the cultural scene of the city with regards to the title. As some of the interviewees pointed out, such a title never comes without controversy (Interviewee E, J, K),

and some even hinted at the political interventionism that marked the title until the present moment (Interviewee C, J). It became inevitable that during the interviews a strong drift towards the subject of the ECoC controversy would take place. It is not directly tied to the community's belonging to a transition state, and for that reason, the researcher decided it is valuable to grant a separate section to it.

The title ignited enthusiasm in the beginning and motivated many people to bring forth new initiatives, but over time this enthusiasm faded (Interviewee C, J). Nevertheless, the fact stands that there have been new organizations growing and emerging since 2016, but there is no precise way to tell if the title had a causal effect on them. After winning the title, there have been multiple accounts from interviewees related to a failure to transparently communicate the programme (Interviewee C, D, K).

The communication issues snowballed into a general distrust towards the activity of the TM2021 Association, and of the way in which funds were administered. The suspicions were heightened by accounts of the media, and as a result a significant part of the Association's activity became that of defending itself (Interviewee J). A better communication could have *deflated* the bubble of suspicion that began to grow around the Association – by giving the community at large and the cultural operators the feeling that they are taking part in a bigger initiative (Interviewee E). But the opposite happened: there were an increased distrust in the practices of the Association and as a result friction began to develop between the Association and the cultural community, and among the cultural operators themselves as well (Interviewee A, C).

The latter point was emphasized by the fact that the Association became a producer for some of its events instead of reaching out to resources within the local community and thus strengthening it (Interviewee A). One opinion among the interviewees is that an ECoC title should be first of all supportive of the independent sector and to strengthen that, instead of heavily focusing on the already publicly funded structures. And to go one step further, the scope of an ECoC should not only be to finance projects, but to strengthen the cultural creative community (Interviewee D).

In general terms, the change of the title for Timișoara from 2021 to 2023 is regarded as a positive development, but not exclusively out of pandemic related reasons. Some respondents, although not all (Interviewee B), agreed that the change could be described as a

*second chance*, and should the title been held in 2021, it would have hardly been an honourable manifestation (Interviewee A, C, D, E, I, J, K).

Because so many issues regarding the ECoC were not related to the pandemic, the perspectives of change coming from the interviewees were also not heavily focused on the pandemic, on the contrary – on the communication, artistic directorship, general management, financial and fundraising issues, and the role of the association. Some respondents mentioned also content-related changes to be necessary (Interviewee A, D, E), but this was not an unanimously agreed upon idea (Interviewee B, C). There is an urgent need for a better, more transparent and cohesive communication strategy that would even encourage a rebranding, and could go hand in hand with a new role of the association: as an umbrella for all the cultural operators in the city. It was pointed out that associating with the ECoC title offers the perspective of wider and more varied audiences, and it facilitated interdisciplinary collaborations especially toward the IT sector (Interviewee E, H). However, it was acknowledged that at the management level there is an urgent need for an artistic directorship to coordinate the efforts within the city, and create coherence across the programme (Interviewee A, J, M).

The role of the Association is another actual topic given the intention and steps made by the Municipality to establish the Centre for Projects, which would finance the cultural operators applying for public financing. Within this new configuration the Association would not be a central logistic and institutional node anymore, so its role is prone to shifting. There is a consensus around the idea that the Association should be a node and a centralizer, a promoter of all initiatives under ECoC2023, but there are at the same time voices affirming that the Association should give up on directly producing content for the title (Interviewee A, C, D, E).

Lastly there is something to be said about the Bid book and the legacy projected by it, and what is still feasible to implement at this stage and in the conditions of a global pandemic. There have been opinions that the Bid book should be given up on at this stage and an assessment be made of the state of the cultural ecosystem of the city (Interviewee A, D, E, I, J). While the Bid book reflected very well the spirit of the city as an innovation hub and a city of entrepreneurs, the current conditions may prevent its faithful implementation. Another complaint mentioned was the fact that the Bid book was never completely understood, or read in the same key by all the decision makers – a situation which led to tensions between

the artistic team and either the Supervisory Board or even the community (Interviewee C, J). The topic of the legacy is closely tied to what can be delivered in the title year, both in terms of infrastructure and events. The opinions are very varied in this case: while some mention the infrastructure projects, such as Multiplexity (Interviewee H), others wonder what does the ECoC title leave the community (Interviewee A, D), in the sense that the legacy is carried out through the people.

Although from a distance it may seem that the issues were punctual, they are in fact tied to a greater system that Romania perpetuates. Its profile of a transition country, with a high perception of corruption, archaic institutions and legal frameworks significantly affect the manner in which such monumental projects as the ECoCs are implemented.

#### **4.6 On Transition Economies**

In Romania, the concept of the heavy communist inheritance prevails today, in addition to a high perception of corruption. According to the Corruption Perception Index in 2020, Romania scored 44, and is towards the bottom of the list in the European Union (Transparency International, CPI 2020). This perception has not changed however since 2012. Post-communism and transition were not experienced easily in Romania. Besides record numbers of emigrants leaving the country, chaotic privatization of national enterprises, increased poverty, and a poorly reformed state, post-communism was endured in the streets through numerous protests over the years. One interviewee summarized the transition years very swiftly (Interviewee A):

“I lived communism, I was brought up in communism, I hated communism, I climbed the balcony of the Opera House at the Revolution. I hoped it would change. Still then I stood in the rifle fight, nothing changed, I was beaten by the miners, nothing changed. I've been demonstrating - since the 90s I'm in the streets. The last demonstration was in 2019. So that's enough for us: from 1989 to 2019, still in the streets, still in the streets.”

It was a common view that given the political interventionism in culture in general, there is a reluctance from the independent sector to get involved with anything that has to do with the public sector (Interviewee D, I). Thus, they carry out their activity independently from the state. And moreover, the perception is, and it could be backed up by facts, that culture has generally been regarded as a non-essential domain (Interviewee E). And this perspective sometimes translated into lack of interest, has affected the ECoC title as well.



The cultural operators pointed out that there was no political consensus with regards to Timișoara's ECoC title, there was little responsibility assumed at regional and national levels, and sometimes even at the local one (Interviewee C). The general view among the respondents was that the title is first and foremost the Municipality's responsibility (Interviewee D, A), but there were also mentions that it should be regarded as a national project, and support should come from the highest levels in the state (Interviewee B).

Since September 2020, there was a change in the local administration, and the respondents remarked a change in attitudes, in that the local administration became more active and took more responsibility for the project, without necessarily becoming a censor (Interviewee A, B, C, D, E). In this sense it is not necessarily regarded as political interventionism in the project, although there is a consciousness that the success of such a project can be politically leveraged. The Municipality's initiatives were welcomed as promising, although there are questions about the pace at which the changes are happening (Interviewee E).

There is a complex apparatus however, that involves more institutional actors at various levels: regional and national, where the responsibility issues perpetuate. And the way in which the lack of political responsibility translated was the lack of financial support it was expected to provide, and absence of predictability. These two matters perpetuate at all levels: the respondents from both sides signalled that there is little financial predictability at the national level for the cultural sector, and no framework for multiannual funding (Interviewee B, C, J, K, M, N). Even in the case of the ECoC title a legal framework was not put into place to ensure the multiannual funding of projects. Moreover, local, even national budgets are often not voted until the second quarter of the year, and as a result all project financing gets delayed towards the third quarter of the year, when there is an explosion of events, activities, openings, concerts and other cultural manifestations (Interviewee E, J, M, N). As a result, there would be months without any cultural activity, and months when everything would happen at once only to ensure the expense account would happen.

The latter point is also not without trouble as the respondents pointed out significant delays in receiving the funds from the public authorities, a fact which has two consequences: on the one hand a break of trust with the collaborators (Interviewee J), and on the other hand the incapacity to ensure international cooperation due to an unpredictability of funding (Interviewee C, J, M). As a result, and it is something which is acknowledged by the cultural

operators, it is not the blame of the Association that the funds which were promised would not arrive in time, but with significant delays: it was out of their power to control when would the money come in (Interviewee B). It was pointed out by the interviewees that for many years the money only came from the municipality, not from the Ministry of the County Council (Interviewee C). What could have been within the power of the Association was to attract private funds as was specified in the Bid book, but there was no fundraising department (Interviewee A, C). There could not have been any good financial planning in absence of predictability.

There were multi-level management issues that did not entirely depend on the Association, but given the problematic communication strategy that the Association adopted since winning the title but losing the trust of the local community, it became a scapegoat of the project – all due to a lack of transparency in how the funds were managed. A result was very well summarized by one interviewee (Interviewee A):

“Everyone argued with everyone. Everyone wanted to be the boss.”

It was also an issue of disproportionate expectations, both regarding inclusion in the project of the entirety of the cultural community, and on the other hand of how the project would be funded. There was an unrealistic expectation, which still persists to date, that the European Union would heavily fund this title, and that it would not be a local, regional and national economic effort (Interviewee A, C). On the other hand, a phenomenon emerged, which one respondent termed as “a kind of economic starvation principle”, which entailed that “one never said that there was not money, one said that there was money but you won't get it because you've done this wrong, and in the sense that there were delays that were administrative on the surface but in reality, were antagonistic” (Interviewee J). It is quite impossible to determine what was the reality of this intricate situation, but the fact is that if was a context in which accusations and suspicions modelled the social reality, with lasting effects to this day. The Association became a scapegoat both from the perspective of the local cultural community and the public funders, and as a result, for a considerable amount of time, it had to direct its efforts towards constantly defending itself – an endeavour which in fact did not help the implementation of the title.

There were attempts at creating a transparent implementation, by employing the open call strategy. This is a point where is not a general consensus over what the best strategy would be. There were interviewees of the opinion that the open call was a tool that was

abused to give a false sense of transparency and in fact not taking responsibility for implementing a certain programme, curated and with a clear vision (Interviewee E). On the other hand, others thought that at this point it should just be assessed what the cultural ecosystem can offer through open calls and to organize the title around those resources (Interviewee A, J).

In looking forward towards the 2023 horizon there is, once again, little consensus on how it should be proceeded further. The external vision that the group of experts put forward is looked at generally positively because, as it was termed by a respondent, “sometimes being too close to the problem makes one not see as clearly, the locals may be too close to the issue” (Interviewee E). There is consensus around the fact that the political factor should claim more responsibility, and offer proper, constant and predictable financial support. The project should have been a strategy not only of the city, but also with national echoes, driving forward the legal change in terms of multiannual financing in culture to name one objective. There still is political tension, even though the representatives of the political parties within the Municipality, County Council, and the Ministry of Culture are part of the same coalition of governance – and this is a point which should not even be under scrutiny. However, when it comes to implementation, a flexible structure should be kept in place, because as the respondents which are either part of these structures, or have dealt with them, any public structure is highly rigid, accompanied by a dense bureaucracy, and such a monumental project to be implemented by the Municipality is counterproductive (Interviewee C). This being a more specific view than that of the unreformed political factor which becomes an obstacle in the implementation of any project.

Finally, it is significant to mention a discussion around the European Union’s involvement in the project. One opinion regarded it as insufficient, not in terms of financial support, but in terms of consultancy and guidance in implementing the project, and that the monitoring reports are not a sufficient form of guidance (Interviewee J). However, it was mentioned by perspectives in the administration that there have been constant discussions with representatives of the EU which have supported the process (Interviewee M, N). In a social context where perceptions, suspicions and even hearsay – words to use a general term – shape the social reality through the media, there is an elevated need for transparency, communication and openness, but most of all, there is a need for action.

The issues that haunted the ECoC title for Timișoara are much more systemic and deeply grounded in the practices of the country. From an organizational perspective, the pandemic was a solution to many problems, rather than an obstacle. One interviewee used a strong terminology in this sense (Interviewee J):

“The pandemic is just one big excuse. They were not ready for 2021 (...), so the pandemic came like a gift from the gods to push it up.”

## 5 Conclusions

In the past years, the cultural scene in Timișoara has suffered friction, scandal, animosities, sometimes as a result of diverging agendas, needs and expectations. Fortunately, with or without the title, the cultural scene in Timișoara has been growing. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, was to some extent overwhelming due to the uncertainty of the situation in general. Fortunately, the pandemic has not had a devastating effect on the cultural ecosystem, nor on the title itself. On the contrary, the delay, as it transpires from the interviews, offered the opportunity for the stakeholders in the city to take a step back and reorient their strategies. As a first conclusion following from the interviews, the time offered by postponing the title with two years is a chance to stabilize the programme, the funding streams and legal frameworks, a process which is currently unfolding.

From a content perspective this paper bears little interest, but with regards to what represented the focus of this paper, the processual aspect of the reprogramming, some compelling points of reference are transparency, communication and integration. The aforementioned coordinates represent tools that are within the reach of the local community, and they are what was lacking so far in the programming for the ECoC title. What is beyond the local community's reach, and it is at the latitude of the national administration is stability and predictability, especially financial. There was a unanimous consensus among interviewees, both cultural operators and from the local administration side that financial stability and predictability is needed to be ensured from a governmental level, so that in the field the programme could move forward, especially in terms of establishing international partnerships.

From an audience perspective, this paper sought to answer what can still be delivered to the public taking into account the pandemic context, and what needs to change. The interviews revealed that it is possible still to engage as much of the local social fabric through a rescaling of the programmes and their performance in the open public space. This way the neighbourhood approach can still be upheld. The Covid-19 surely will induce a shift in the paradigm of organizing events, but with rescaling in mind, and using the resource of the public space, the in-person format of events can still be maintained to a certain extent.

The pandemic opened a door towards using the digital space more widely and frequently, and it can be expected that the future shape of the programme would have a more pronounced digital expression than before. The digital space poses some questions of access to culture, as was pointed out by the literature, in the sense that audiences by surprise may

find many hindrances to accessing culture digitally. The interviewees expressed concern in this sense as well, even though the digital space opened the opportunity for wider audiences by habit to engage with the cultural programme, and they expressed willingness to maintain a hybrid format. Thus arises the question of how could the marginalised audiences still be engaged. The answer resides in the neighbourhood approach that characterized the programme in the first place, and in the rescaling of the events' size through number of participants. Despite the opportunities of the digital, a wide consensus among interviewees was that culture cannot be exclusively delivered and experienced digitally, so the return to an in-person format was paramount. The analysis of the interviews brought to light another significant fact regarding the neighbourhood approach: multiculturalism is a fact within the fabric of the demographic of the city, but what is lacking is interaction, and collaboration. That is why invitations to co-creation with the public are so significant. Lastly, by focusing on the neighbourhoods' inclusion in the cultural fabric of the city, the ECoC programme could foster connections between the inhabitants of the city, which, as described in the literature review section, is crucial to the legacy of an event such as ECoC.

Regarding entrepreneurship, this paper researched ways in which the ECoC title could provide support to the local cultural entrepreneurs. The perspective adopted by the interviewees was oriented towards a long-term horizon, in that a formula for sustainability needs to be found, so that local cultural operators of all kinds could thrive in the city. All interviewees were keen to point out that the ECoC title does not weigh crucially on the continuation of their activity, but it could offer it some dynamism to it. There are two perspectives to this dynamism revealed by interviews and supported by literature: that the ECoC title would offer a platform wide enough to facilitate connection to new publics and on the other hand to ensure predictability in financing. Both the observation and the interviews revealed that the pandemic had an indirect effect on measures that could help the cultural entrepreneurs in that it offered more time for the legal and bureaucratic frameworks to provide the necessary adjustments so that the ECoC title in Timișoara to be implemented. The pandemic has induced varying degrees of mission drift in the activity of cultural entrepreneurs, and with the change of the programme, there is room for adaptation to the new conditions. What is stressed time and again by the literature and acknowledged by the cultural operators as well is the need and benefits of collaboration and networking. Multidisciplinarity can be achieved organically without inducing mission drift if it is acted

upon when a new need is identified and solved through the network. Thus, it does not need to come as a top-down requirement, but there is space for bottom-up development.

Both the literature and interviewees expressed awareness that conflict is to be expected in the management of such a major event, and Timișoara is not an exception. The literature acknowledges a value in conflict, in that it can move forward ideas and generate innovation, but the way in which these conflicts are settled depends on the local social contexts. While aware of the inevitability of conflict, interviewees placed significant value on networking and collaboration, approaches which could foster interdisciplinarity, or a wider audience reach. The literature too points out that through the knowledge spill over of networking, innovation is achievable. There are other ways to achieving progress without the necessity of the conflict. This conclusion to a more ample discussion of the role of the EU in the ECoC programme. It is still a delicate subject which needs further research, but the question that emerges from the interviews and the general experience of Timișoara is whether a closer implication of the EU would have helped avoiding some conflicts. The literature somewhat disagrees, but the monitoring commissions seem not effective enough.

One certain point is that in the 2023 perspective, the cultural scene in the city needs clarity, and that can be achieved by a slight shift in the role of the Association, as a central node of convergence bringing together the local initiatives, and through curatorship to formulate a cohesive concept for the programme. The city disposes of resources, these just need to be coordinated and represented. The views expressed by the interviewees with regards to a desirable legacy of this project did not have a material underpinning. On the contrary, they continuously referred to what is left to the community, and how will they learn to collaborate better with one another, and develop partnerships. The ECoC legacy in the eyes of the people who are in the front lines of the project focus on the human factor, and their definition of success resides in intangible benefits.

The last point of interest for this research wondered what was the role that transition played in the implementation of the ECoC programme. The general conclusion is that political consensus and responsibility need to be materialized – it is a point stressed by all interviewees and sustained by the literature. The way in which it urgently needs to happen is through the financing scheme for culture: multi-annual funding options, and fulfilling the commitments made. The transition economy dimension of Romania needs to be challenged and surpassed to some extent to allow for this project to function. One of the relics of the

chaotic transition in Romania includes the outdated legal framework for public funding in culture and the heavy bureaucracy around it, along with the lack of predictability, that hindered the implementation of the programme. Another artifact of communism is that the central government still conditions to a large extent cultural management even at local levels, so there is still a high degree of centralisation in this area. There are many hopes among interviewees that the current local administration would be an engine for change in this sense. When political responsibility is talked about it does not exclusively entail the absence of conflict, but a stability in financial commitments. Without these, the programme cannot move forward because it cannot only rely on promises, but it needs legal frameworks and active support from all levels of government.

In a world where *words* determine the social fabric, transparency is paramount, and more than that, action. There is little time remaining until the title is inaugurated in 2023 and many trails which have not functioned so far need to be put to work. As it was stressed in the interviews, the title belongs to a significant extent to the entire country, and the success of an ECoC programme is not exclusive to the local actors. Moreover, the success of an ECoC is not only measured in economic terms, but also in intangible ones: and one general grievance of the interviews was that collaboration of the cultural scene should be fostered in the city. When asked about what would the success of TM2023 look like, the majority of interviewees pointed at intangible legacies, for the community, for their sustainability and for their networks.

To come back to the research question, the Municipality of Timișoara, from the perspective of its local cultural scene, can adapt to the 2023 scenario, from a perspective of audiences through the rescaling of the events and maintaining the neighbourhood approach, from an entrepreneurship approach by fostering collaboration and networking, and from the perspective of its transition legacy by offering stability and predictability.

### **5.1 Recommendations**

Based on the aforementioned conclusions, it is significant to point that there is still openness and willingness from the cultural operators of the city to work towards the success of TM2023, even if the level of enthusiasm is not the same as it was in the beginning. There was an awareness that such a project would carry controversy, and for that reason there was a number of cultural operators which did not directly express their willingness to be integrated



in the project – but that does not come at the expense of their reluctance to collaborate or support the title.

In the 2023 perspective, it is important that the project should have an identity and a carrier of that, an umbrella entity to bring together all cultural actors and thus foster the much-wanted platform for collaboration. The TM2021 Association has the resources to carry out that endeavour, but the way in which it will do so is still hard to predict, and it depends on the resources available, both human and material. The recommendation of the researcher is to put together the resources that are available in the city: with the construction of new cultural infrastructure projects for the ECoC title, it is paramount that these are not left empty, but instead these could represent the platform for the cultural actors to encounter one another and create novelty, on behalf of these new infrastructure projects.

### **5.2 Evaluation and further research**

In the perspective of future research, the ECoC title in Timișoara is still a volatile and highly dynamic subject. There are new developments made every week and the aim of this study was to capture the effervescence of the moment, how does the changing process look like and what is taken into consideration at this stage. A study of relevance could be carried out in the legacy period, and an assessment be made of how does the cultural landscape looks like in Timișoara after holding the title. Another significant trail of research would be that of the (necessary) involvement of the EU with the programme, and what are some suitable forms.

The limitations of this study are related to the notion of time, in part because every week there are new developments which could be significant to the scope of this research, and in part because there are more voices on the local cultural scene that deserve to be heard and included in such a study. The strengths of this study resided in the attention it paid to representing the cultural fabric of the city in its diversity, and even though it is not an exhaustive representation, it did include new actors in a discussion that concerns the entire community.

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## Appendix A. Interview Guide and Coding

### a. Cultural Operators

Interview questions	Coordinate	Concepts
Tell me something about your activity in general.	Entrepreneurship	Local cultural entrepreneurship Entrepreneurship without ECoC
How has this activity changed in the past 13/14 months/since March 2020?	Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship The pandemic Mission drift
Could you tell me a little about your collaboration with TM2023?	Transition Entrepreneurship	Collaboration ECoC
What are advantages that the title has brought upon your activity? Have you sensed any improvement?	Entrepreneurship Audiences	Audience development Collaboration ECoC
What do you think could have gone better in the past years regarding the TM2021 projects/programs/activities?	Transition	Corruption Collaboration ECoC responsibility Communication Financials Predictability
Do you feel that entrepreneurship has been encouraged through the open calls?	Entrepreneurship	The pandemic ECoC Transition/Corruption
Were you able to bring forth, or implement innovative projects and ideas within the ECoC projects? Do you feel there is space for innovation within the TM2023 programme?	Entrepreneurship	Innovation Cultural and Creative Industries
Now the title was moved to 2023 – how do you see this change?	Transition	Politics Management The pandemic
What do you think needs to be changed about the ECoC programme?	ECoC	The pandemic
Who should help with that change? The local operators/ the national authorities/ the EU?	Transition	(Multi-level) management
Can you tell me a little about the institutional relationship you've had with the TM2021 related authorities: TM2021 Association and the townhall?	Transition	Politics Management
How do scandals of misconduct affect the implementation of the ECoC programme?	Transition	Management Corruption
The bidbook for the EcoC title often talks about the intercultural, active spirit of Timișoara – how is that reflected in your projects/work for the TM2021/23 projects?	Audiences	Access to culture Multiculturalism ECoC legacy
The ECoC programme of TM is very much centred around audiences – how were you able to connect with audiences lately?	Audiences	Audience engagement Access to culture Participation to culture
What effect do you think the pandemic will have on the/your future projects?	Entrepreneurship	Access to culture Participation to culture

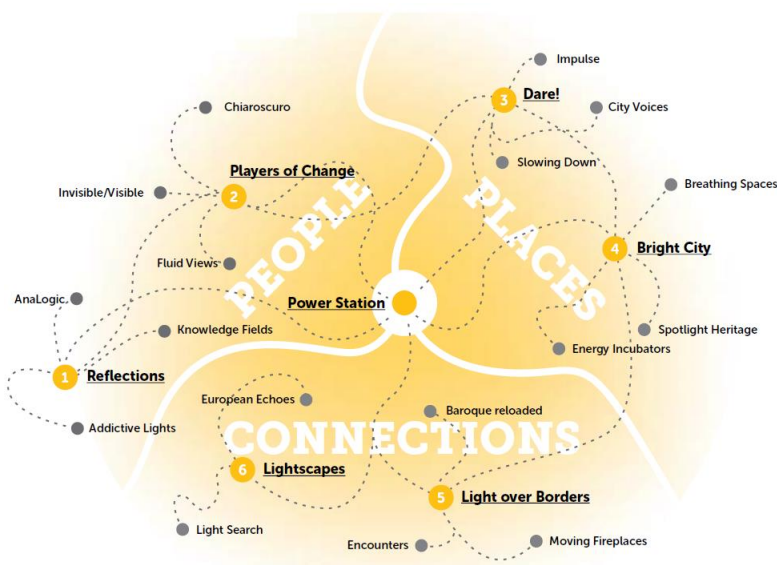
There has been a migration to the digital space – do you think it has been exploited enough?	Audiences	Access to culture Audience enlargement Audience engagement
The year 2020 has also meant a change in the local administration, how did this affect the TM2021 title preparations?	Transition	Cultural policy Politics
How does the pandemic influence the ECoC programme – what needs to be changed?	Transition	The pandemic Audiences Entrepreneurship
How does a successful title look now?	ECoC	Collaboration

## b. Administration

<b>Interview questions</b>	<b>Coordinate</b>	<b>Concepts</b>
How did the pandemic “catch” the preparations for TM2021?	ECoC	The pandemic Management
How would you describe the year 2020 for the ECoC TM2021?	ECoC	The pandemic Management
There has been a migration to the digital space – do you think it has been exploited enough?	Audiences	Audience engagement Access to culture
The year 2020 has also meant a change in the local administration, how did this affect the TM2021 title preparations?	Transition	Politics
The title has been postponed for 2023 – how do you see this change?	ECoC	The pandemic
How does the pandemic influence the ECoC programme – what needs to be changed?	ECoC	The pandemic Audiences
And who should help with that change? (National government/ EU/ local authorities)	Transition	Multi-level management
What sort of help has come from the EU? And what would have been needed at a local level?	Transition	Multi-level management
When we talk about changing the ECoC programme – what points of action are taken as reference points?	ECoC	Financials Management
The ECoC programme of TM is very much cantered around audiences – do you think that is still possible in the context of the Covid pandemic?	Audiences	Digitalization
What are the difficulties of audience engagement in these times?	Audiences	Audience engagement Participation to culture
Are there new modes of audience engagement used?	Audiences	Access to culture
Is the plan to attract a significant international audience still feasible?	ECoC	The pandemic Financials
What about international partners – how is the state of these partnerships?	ECoC	Financials
Let’s talk about entrepreneurship – because this period has been particularly hard for them, as has been for everyone in the cultural sector: is there a plan to encourage entrepreneurial projects more?	Entrepreneurship	Sustainability Legacy
How do scandals of misconduct affect the implementation of the ECoC programme?	Transition	Corruption Political responsibility

## Appendix B. Configuration of the ECoC Programme in Timișoara

In the case of Timișoara, the programme is heavily focused on engaging audiences, both local and foreign ones. The three coordinates are *people*, *places* and *connections*. Participation and implication are strong components of various activities and projects, which are grouped around a *Power Station*, a component of the project meant to build capacity and develop skills, connections and competence (Bid book 2016, 28). The three coordinates then take the shape of territories, and each territory within the project is comprised of two *stations*. Each station then has two to three *trails* which in fact represent various cultural actions.



Bid book 2016, 29.

“Timișoara won the competition for the ECoC 2021 award with a programme that relied on its ‘urban firsts’—the most important being that it was the first city to have street lighting in Europe” (Popescu and Voiculescu 2020, 3). Thus, the slogan of the project – Shine your light - Light up your city! – became multi-layered. The programme was complex and had as a central point audience development. For that reason, the programme aimed to focus on neighbourhoods and engagement in all parts of the city, rather than concentrating all events in the city centre.

In the candidacy portfolio, there are projects and events that aim to combine arts and technology, such as *Knowledge Fields*, which adds an educational dimension, and *Addictive Lights* – multimedia installations and performances. There are many connections to the past that are revealed through projects like *Analogic* - collecting relics of recent past, repair workshops, orientation towards recent history, *Spotlight Heritage* – crowd-sourced digital museum, and presence in neighbourhoods, *Moving Fireplaces* – a festival challenging the trauma of migration and the xenophobia that awaits on the other side of the journey, *Baroque*

*Reloaded* – contemporary arts performances that connect to the international heritage. There are a few initiatives targeting diversity, such as *Invisible/Visible* - a project targeting the inclusion of the Roma community, *Fluid Views* – a project targeting LGBTQ topics, including an artist in residence programme, or *Chiaroscuro* a theatre project involving various minorities or marginalised groups, with productions on the topics of marginalisation, collective oppression, and totalitarian and transition regimes. There are also projects that address a more contemporary zone, including *Impulse* – performing arts, *City Voices* – dramaturgy, *Encounters* – the art biennale, and *Light search* – music and visual arts. Finally, there are a few projects specifically targeting open public spaces *Slowing Down* – an organic food festival, *Energy incubators* – actions in neighbourhoods, *Breathing Spaces* – architecture interventions, and *European Echoes* – connections to other ECoCs. Many of these projects are stipulated in the Bid book to be created in collaboration with international partners, including Today’s Art Festival (The Hague), Cultural Center - Španski borci (Ljubljana), Artemisszió Foundation and Romani Design -Erika Varga (Budapest), Queer Lisbon, NAPON - Institute for flexible cultures and technologies (Novi Sad) to name a few.

During the preparation phase there have been numerous obstacles which have to some extent hindered the implementation of the programme. One of these factors was financial instability. Because there are no multi-annual funding schemes in Romania, the cultural sector would have to wait until sometimes even the second quarter of the year for budgets to be approved and then calls to be published, a situation which would postpone all cultural manifestations based on public expenditures towards the second half of the year. This point was emphasized in both Monitoring reports of the European Commission in 2017 and 2019. The government did not offer the proper legal framework for this exceptional project to be implemented, and instead asked the Association to apply for funding on a project-by-project basis which not only brought delays in the activity, but also unnecessarily consumed resources. This situation eventually led to the cancellation of some events in the Bid book and the inability to establish long-term international partnerships, which is the key indicator of the European Dimension.

Because of the problematic communication strategy, it is difficult to evaluate which programmes did unfold, and which were cancelled. Moreover, a number of projects that were not initially included in the Bid book were carried out. The programming was ambiguous, partly due to the financial instability, and its communication was insufficient. As a result, it is still unclear what can be expected in the 2023 perspective.



## Appendix C. Interviewees List

1. Interviewee A – Zoom – 8 May 2021 – Manager Cultural Association: education; Cultural operator.
2. Interviewee B – Timișoara – 10 May 2021 - Manager Cultural Association: music; Cultural operator.
3. Interviewee C – Timișoara – 10 May 2021 - Manager Cultural Association: visual arts; Cultural operator.
4. Interviewee D – Timișoara – 11 May 2021 - Manager Cultural Association: visual arts; Cultural operator.
5. Interviewee E – Timișoara – 12 May 2021 - Manager Cultural Association: visual arts; Cultural operator.
6. Interviewee F – Timișoara – 16 May 2021 – Artist; Cultural operator.
7. Interviewee G – Timișoara – 18 May 2021 – Artist; Cultural operator.
8. Interviewee H – Timișoara – 19 May 2021 – Public cultural institution representative; Cultural operator.
9. Interviewee I – Timișoara – 20 May 2021 – Cultural entrepreneur; Cultural operator.
10. Interviewee J – Zoom – 22 May 2021 – Cultural manager/ formerly TM2021 Association representative; Administration.
11. Interviewee K– Timișoara – 24 May 2021 – Manager Cultural Association: literature; Cultural operator.
12. Interviewee L – Timișoara – 24 May 2021 – Cultural manager and artist; Cultural operator.
13. Interviewee M – Zoom – 25 May 2021 – TM2021 Association representative; Administration.
14. Interviewee N – Timișoara – 4 June 2021 – Municipality of Timișoara representative; Administration.