Shock to the system: Examining legacy effects of Plovdiv 2019 on sustainable development, urban metabolism, and resilience

Student Name: Boyana Stoilova
Student Number: 696695

Supervisor: Dr. Donagh Horgan

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

Our research seeks to enrich the broader discourse on urban development strategies in Europe and bring Western and Eastern European countries closer together, further uniting our societies and strengthening urban resilience. What this work aims to achieve is to deepen our understanding of socioeconomic shocks affecting the urban development trajectories in the SEE region. To do so we examine the 2019 ECOC initiative in Plovdiv comparing it to a small-scale socioeconomic shock that challenges the city's urban resilience. Our focus is on exploring the legacy effect of the ECOC initiative on Plovdiv's current urban development. To address the research question, we drew insights from many academic works, and outlined five key themes related to our study: ownership, governance, cultural heritage, participation, and local identity. Our research employs a qualitative research approach. We conducted 12 online in-depth semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders. What all our conclusions highlight is the urgent need to rethink the notions of ownership, governance, participation, and local identity when it comes to cultural and natural heritage, hence supporting policymakers and citizens alike in seeking novel models for cooperation based on participatory democracy and adaptive reuse principles.

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I. Introduction

Urbanization in Europe

As a worldwide phenomenon, urban expansion proves a significant challenge propelled by numerous factors ranging from increased population due to migration to educational, cultural, and socio-economic opportunities that cities offer. (Kapucu et al., 2021) According to the United Nations' (2018) most recent report, 55.3 per cent of the world's population lives in cities. Moreover, by 2030, urban settlements are projected to house 60 per cent of people globally. (see Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix C))

Europe, however, was the first continent to experience widespread urbanization and it is one of the fundamental characteristics of the European civilization. (Antrop, 2004) This phenomenon gradually spread from Southeast Europe (SEE) around 700 B.C. across the whole continent. (Antrop, 2004) Although gradual, this process speeded up dramatically during the 18th century as Europe became the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. Hence, urbanization proves to be a continuous process that reflects the evolution of human civilization, shifting societal values, and competing urban planning philosophies.

Naturally, increased urbanization has various effects on communities. However, most of the adverse effects result from the financialization of built environment, commodification of public space, urban governance challenges and the pursuit of continuous economic growth. (Korkmaz & Meşhur, 2021; Weber, 2002) Considering the heterogeneous nature of European societies and the observed decline of democracy across countries, the question of how to ensure an urban environment in which residents thrive proves a pressing topic in resent research literature. Furthermore, scholars have extensively discussed how the combined effects of urbanization and climate change make communities more vulnerable, highlighting the need for diverse initiatives worldwide that bolster the resilience of urban settlements. (Chapman et al., 2017; Grimmond, 2007; Huong & Pathirana, 2013; Lin et al., 2020)

Urbanization Patterns in Eastern Europe

Although the abovementioned challenges threaten Europe's entire population, some European regions are better equipped to address them, benefiting from their historical and urbanization trajectories and the vast knowledge base of existing research. As noted by many scholars, the urbanization processes express cycles of evolution, spreading in different ways through space. This is particularly noticeable in the different speeds of development between

Northern and Southern Europe. (Antrop, 2004; Cortinovis et al., 2019; Kasanko et al., 2006) Moreover, comparing Western to Eastern European cities, the latter proves to be less populated and urbanized, and more dispersed and denser. (Taubenböck et al., 2019) And so, what caused those differences?

Perhaps the most intriguing point in those cities' recent urban development history is linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. The post-socialist urban restructuring that cities in the East have undergone in the 1990s onwards, brought many changes to both people's way of life and of city governance. (Tsenkova, 2006) More generally, the transition from planned to free market economy has resulted in a shift in land use patterns similar to that of Western Europe since the late 1950s. (Taubenböck et al., 2019) Urbanization phases in Eastern Europe, however, should not be considered as direct copy of the West's, but as hybrid. Cities and city regions simultaneously exhibit characteristics of typical features of capitalist urbanization, but relics of the socialist past are still omnipresent. (Taubenböck et al., 2019) The widespread privatization of public spaces and resources did happen due to the predominance of liberal, rather permissive regulatory planning frameworks. (Sykora and Bouzarovski, 2012) However, this allowed the care and protection of cultural and natural heritage to be compromised by economic imperatives.

What is more, a sense of hope and desire to build a new structure of society once more emerged amongst the people from the East bloc. A hope for a shift toward a more democratic political system, and decentralization of political power to local governments. A result that one might argue whether it is fully achieved. The top-down character of city planning persists and limits the possibilities for democratic participation in many East regions. (Tsenkova, 2006)

Despite the shock and the subsequent fear of uncertainty looming over the population, those were also exciting times. Many individuals took on their first entrepreneurial venture driven by the desire to experiment at the expense of widespread agricultural abandonment. (Gutman & Radeloff, 2017) Such a highly dynamic if not chaotic societal and economic setting, however, opens space for unprecedented accumulation of wealth and resources for some, while others went bankrupt.

Considering the nuances of those processes affecting Eastern European cities, one might argue that the post-communist city is an important object of study. Its investigation could bring fresh perspective and new insights into urban and cultural studies, and democratic participation more generally.

Plovdiv and 2019 ECOC (European Capital of Culture)

This work aims to highlight the importance of understanding socioeconomic shocks and contribute to the existing still limited knowledge on the SEE region. In doing so we examine a specific, small-scale socioeconomic "shock" that has been occurring rather regularly in many European cities since 1985.

The European Capital of Culture Initiative (ECOC) presents an opportunity for a city to generate significant cultural, social, and economic benefits at the expense of putting the designated urban areas in unnatural, oftentimes even stressful conditions. According to the European Commission, culture holds significant value for residents and visitors across the European Union (EU), with cultural and creative industries (CCIs) playing crucial role in boosting regional economic competitiveness and attractiveness. (European Capitals of Culture, n.d.)

Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007 put under the ECOC radar several Bulgarian cities, including Plovdiv. The country's second-largest city is considered one of Europe's oldest continuously inhabited cities, and one of the oldest in the world. (Compton, 2020) Such a "living" city whose life spans 8000 years undoubtedly is characterized by a rich cultural legacy and ethnic diversity along with multiple layers of historical turbulences and conflicts. Over time, a pronounced Plovdivian identity blending the traits of both West and East societies formed. Notably, during the 1990s, the city became one of the leading industrial hubs in the Balkan region. The industrial pollution coupled with Transition ("Преход") implications, however, triggered waves of migration, resulting in low quality of life and overlooked local communities. (Sandu, 2023; Mladenov et al., 2008) Recognizing the possibilities that ECOC could bring to changing Plovdiv's socioeconomic trajectory and trigger urban renewal, the city set the goal of winning the 2019 title.

Hence, **this study investigates the legacy effects that an intensive event (or shock) such as the 2019 ECOC has on the current urban development processes in Plovdiv**. The author's motivation to conduct this study lies in her desire to fill the knowledge gap in academic literature about underrepresented cities in Southeast Europe, and Bulgaria in particular. She argues that Plovdiv makes an intriguing case because of the multilayered nature of the city and its inhabitants. Moreover, we need a deeper understanding of the post-imperialist, post-socialist, and post-industrial societies. Studying those communities could provide useful insights into the

current debates around cities undergoing spatial and social transformations within the context of increasing urbanization and threats posed by climate change and social tensions. Therefore, the research's findings could broaden the discourse on social and cultural trends in Europe.

The study is structured as follows: in Section one we introduce the research topic and provide background and context. In Section two we critically review existing literature relevant to the studied topic and outline the main theoretical concepts guiding the research. Section three provides context and justification for analyzing the 2019 ECOC event in Plovdiv. In Section four we describe the research design and methodology employed to conduct the study. In Section five we present and discuss the findings and contour potential avenues for future research. Lastly, section six concludes this study.

II. Literature Review

The multifaceted relationship between cultural and creative industries and urban development is well-established in academic literature. (Hall, 1998; Zukin, 1996; Towse, 2019; Florida, 2019) While this topic has been widely studied by many scholars, the particular focus of existing research has been put on the past and present growth of post-industrial metropolitan city-systems located in the so-called advanced economies, namely North America, Western Europe and Australia. (Pred, 2017; Evans, 2009; Pratt, 2008; Markusen et al., 2006) Acknowledging the significant contributions these studies have made, this paper aims at contributing fresh perspective on how mega-events like the European Capital of Culture have affected the situation in Southeast Europe.

Notably, since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest among academics and policymakers in the role of local culture in local economic development strategies. (Lavanga, 2013) Confronted with the rise of the service economy and deindustrialization, numerous cities have increasingly integrated culture and urban cultural policies into their urban regeneration and city marketing efforts. Weighty investments were directed at cultural infrastructure, flagship projects, and major cultural events, such as festivals, the Olympic Games, and the European Capital of Culture initiative. (Lavanga, 2013) Discussions on the latter, however, are often overlooked, despite their similar effects to events like the Olympics or the World Cup. These effects, especially regarding how such events interact with a city's **cultural heritage**, require further exploration. (Jones, 2020)

Additionally, as Jones (2020) notes, such studies tend to focus primarily on the positive economic outcome mega-events may potentially have on host cities. Hence, to avoid tunnel vision and expand our understanding, we highlight the need to investigate the wider societal and spatial changes these occasions can introduce. Although some important studies on the European Capital of Culture initiative exist, (e.g., Sykes, 2011; Ponzini & Ruoppila, 2011; Mareggi, 2015; Bruzzese, 2015; Dogramadjieva & Tylko, 2023), many of them examine the few years prior to or the event itself as it unfolds. As a result, investigations into the event's aftermath lack a similar amount of attention. (Jones, 2020) This paper takes the step to address this gap by conducting an in-depth case study that explores the 2019 European Capital of Culture initiative in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Hence, to adequately design the research methodology, we reviewed an array of academic works and identified the main theoretical concepts and academic debates to guide this study.

1. Cities as Locations for Dynamic Cultural Production

As Peter Hall (1998) notes, cities "have always been the places where human creativity flourished" (p. 2). Since the late twentieth century many Western European cities have employed the CCIs as a mechanism for economic regeneration, for instance, by filling old factories and warehouses with cultural content to create a new urban image. Due to their economic and demographic expansion urban city-systems across Europe increased in size and complexity. Naturally, challenges of urban management emerged, requiring cities to become incubators for urban innovation (Hall, 1998), and become more resilient to secure the long-term safety and wellbeing of their inhabitants.

1.1. Urban Resilience

Urban resilience has been an emerging concept for the last decade. According to scholars, the overarching concept of resilience can provide insights into complex ideas surrounding sustainability and vulnerability and is increasingly being used to study highly dynamic social-ecological systems (SES) like cities. (Kapucu et al., 2021) Therefore, this research adopts the notion of resilience, originally defined by Walker et al. (2004, as cited in Horgan & Dimitrijević, 2019) as the ability of a system to absorb disruptions and reorganize while maintaining its core function, structure, identity, and feedback mechanisms, and later expanded by Folke (2006) to include "adaptability" and "transformability." (Folke, 2006, as cited in Horgan & Dimitrijević, 2019) Furthermore, every urban settlement possesses a distinctive set of diverse historical and cultural characteristics that shape the built environment and the identity of its citizens. Understanding the role of this background proves paramount for urban resilience. (Campanella, 2006, as cited in Kapucu et al., 2021)

The concept of **social innovation** naturally enters academic discussions since it offers a novel approach to fostering urban resilience and sustainable urban development. It is described as a participatory-driven democratic practice aiming to facilitate the co-production of scalable community-led solutions. Such models should include focused policies and local structures that are sufficiently open and adaptable to foster ownership among diverse stakeholders, promoting alternative approaches to urban development regarding the built environment. (Horgan & Dimitrijević, 2018, 2019) Hence, strengthening the relationship between urban and social development as both prove inherently intertwined.

1.2. Urban Metabolism

Inspired by the idea of studying cities through the lens of humans and nature as two interdependent systems, we introduce the notion of **urban metabolism** as the next concept guiding our research. Scholars argue that it proves fundamental to developing sustainable cities and communities. (Kennedy et al., 2007) The idea of urban metabolism largely draws on an analogy with the metabolism of living organisms. Much like most organisms, cities have developed sophisticated inner systems shaped by and shaping social, economic, political, and cultural processes. Figuratively speaking, energy, resources and information constantly move through the urban fabric, "nourishing" urban cells and organs, while their transformation emits waste that must leave the system. (Decker et al., 2000, as cited in Kennedy et al., 2007)

Expanding on the urban metabolism analogy slightly, we decided to integrate the "living city" metaphor into the study's methodology, i.e. considering Plovdiv a living organism. Hence, its urban resilience similarly depends on the diversity of its urban "microbiome", i.e. the diversity of the inhabitants and their role in urban metabolism. In line with several studies on human metabolism, we argue that fostering resilience requires ongoing conscious effort and collective responsibility to promote social equity. (Ye and Medzhitov, 2019; Lloyd-Price et al., 2016)

1.3. Parallels between Natural and Cultural Capital

Throsby (2011) claims that other parallels could be made between urban and living capital. More specifically, he explores the similarities biodiversity and cultural diversity, and environmental and cultural sustainability.

Starting with **cultural diversity**. He points out that both are inherited from the past, both provide benefits from their use and non-use and require care. Throsby (2011) also highlights that this understanding is particularly useful when valuing **heritage assets** such as historic buildings, groups of buildings, and archaeological sites. Moreover, both biodiversity and cultural diversity are especially valued because they are simply there. Both ecosystems support economic activity through their invisible networks and relationships holding them together. Lastly, certain species and cultural expressions may possess untapped potential for economic benefits. Hence, their loss could incur costs or missed future opportunities. (Throsby, 2011)

Moving on to **cultural sustainability**, Throsby (2011) suggests that the principles guiding the sustainable management of natural resources should be applied to the sustainable development of cultural capital. The first principle implies the responsible consumption of cultural assets by the current generation so as not to compromise their use by future generations. Throsby (2011) also emphasizes that this principle must be understood in its preventive sense, i.e. to avoid risks in the face of possibly irreversible change. The next principle is based on the understanding that each part in any ecosystem exists in an inextricable relationship with the other parts in it. Hence, he also warns that cultural capital should not be neglected, as this would lead to negative social and economic consequences. If we do not invest in the protection of cultural values and in maintaining and/or increasing the stocks of tangible and intangible cultural assets, we will risk cultural systems to collapse. This, in turn, will negatively affect our welfare and the economy. (Throsby, 2011)

2. CCIs as Mechanisms for Stimulating Local Culture

Another central debate in the discussion about the role of cultural and creative industries in urban development revolves around the notions of Creative Class and Creative Districts. (Florida, 2002; Lavanga, 2020)

2.1. Creative Class

Florida (2002, 2005) posits the Creative Class as the engine of urban regeneration and economic growth. The key takeaway from his work is that cities must focus on attracting creative individuals to secure long-term success. Florida's one-size-fits-all message gained rapid acceptance among cities as he argues that any city could transform into a dynamic, creative hub with appropriate infrastructure investments and interventionalist policies. (Peck, 2005) Numerous scholars have criticized the logic and empirical claims of Florida's Creative Class theory (Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2008; Wilson and Keil, 2008) for depending on inner-city property development, gentrification, and urban labor markets that heavily rely on low-wage service workers, especially in the hospitality sector. (McCANN, 2007; Jakob, 2010; Peck, 2011)

Moreover, critical empirical research highlights how the "creative class" thesis and its related "creative city" policy recommendations deepen social and economic inequalities in cities across North America (McCANN, 2007; Zimmerman, 2008; Catungal et al. (2009), Europe (Bayliss, 2007; Vanolo, 2008), Australia, (Atkinson & Easthope, 2009) and Asia (Sasaki, 2010).

Therefore, this study approaches the overpromising transformational rhetoric around creative class with skepticism and caution.

2.2. Creative Districts

Hall's (1998) analysis of the role of creativity in the development of ancient cities such as Athens or Paris provides valuable insights for our study. He argues that all these urban settlements, which we today regard as creative hubs, were cities in transition that underwent a rapid economic and social transformation because of their role as centers of cultural, financial, natural, and human capital. However, contrary to Florida, Hall acknowledges the role of fortunate "chances" in urban development and does not rush to prescribe ready-made solutions. (Lavanga, 2020) Nevertheless, Lavanga (2020) points out that many "policymakers around the world have tried copy-and-paste strategies to create cultural districts from the top down" (p. 180). Questioning the efficiency and sustainability of such an approach, she highlights that the emergence of cultural districts proves an organic, gradual process akin to the notion of creative commons. Moreover, while random events might initiate the formation of these districts, it is the dynamic interplay between various industries, labor markets, and institutions that drives their inner growth.

Another trait of creative districts lies in their dependency on local production networks and tendency to cluster in space. (Lavanga, 2020) Hence, local cultural operators benefit from their geographical proximity and access to a common pool of human, natural, physical, and social capital. (Ostrom, 2000) Notably, Ostrom (2000) argues that regional and national governmental bodies could significantly influence the availability and accessibility of each of those assets to citizens in pursuit of sustainable urban development. For brevity and conciseness, we will refer to these tangible and intangible assets as **cultural heritage**.

2.3. Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity proves an unavoidable topic within cultural economics and is often framed by scholars in terms of its capacity to influence both cultural production and consumption. (Towse, 2010; Throsby, 2011; Towse & Hernández, 2020)

Culture, however, brings various connotations. In our study, we follow the definition posed by Montalvo & Reynal-Querol (2014), namely "culture as a set of shared values and beliefs that social groups hold and transmit across generations" (p. 486). Notably, social groups

cluster in space usually due to their ethnic boundaries, i.e., differences in race, religion, or language. (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2014) Since cities embody the social nature of humans by providing environments where individuals with various ethnicities, beliefs, and backgrounds can connect with one another, grow social communities, and cultivate a sense of belonging, we then refer to these different social formations as ethnic groups. Hence, we consider society as comprising various ethnic groups interacting with one another.

Naturally, questions such as: are cultural differences good or bad for urban development; can cultural differences generate conflicts and thus, hinder sustainability, or can cultural diversity encourage creativity and promote economic welfare, require further exploration.

3. ECOC as a Tool to Promote Cultural Diversity and Local Identity

Designed to "highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area, and foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities" (European Capitals of Culture, n.d.) the ECOC initiative serve as a catalyst for urban regeneration. It can trigger the process of changing the city's image in the eyes of its residents and visitors and boost tourism. Moreover, cultural heritage proves vital in shaping the image and **identity** of cities and regions, often serving as a focal point for cultural tourism. (European Capitals of Culture, n.d.) This aligns with the creative district theory, since both have been employed as mechanisms for urban renewal and enhancing economic performance.

When it comes to governing local cultural economy, Pratt's (2015) interpretation of resilience – one that associates with resilience and local cultural policies, proves particularly suitable to our research. He argues that such interpretation is especially relevant to the cultural economy "as it acknowledges the situated nature of social, economic and cultural action" (p.1). Thus, the term "local" indicates the idea of locality understood as "a unique combination of various networks that construct the 'difference' of places" (Pratt, 2015, p. 1). This perspective is in line with Folke's (2006) conclusion that the way cultural resilience is enacted proves an active dynamic process.

3.1. The Role of ECOC on Urban Metabolism

As Jones (2020) notes, a crucial aspect of cultural mega-events like the ECOC concerns the way they treat public and private property regarding built heritage preservation. In the

rhetoric of urban metabolism, these interventions utilize (sometimes even digest) existing venues and/or public spaces (i.e. resources) by transforming them through cultural content, and thus giving them new functions. (Jones, 2020) Some examples might include pedestrianization, socialization or festivalization of urban zones.

Although such processes are usually perceived positively, urban areas located at the margin of global capitalism, such as in the SEE, are more susceptible to its predatory mechanisms. (Rossi, 2022) Therefore, unchecked financialization and commodification of cultural heritage, in the form of fast market-led "urban revival", might introduce environmental, social, and economic challenges. As Horgan & Dimitrijević (2018) argue, the common thread linking these twenty-first-century challenges lies in a toxic mix of neo-liberal policies and exploitative production methods that have been prevalent since the Industrial Revolution.

The Right to the City

To challenge the hegemonic neoliberal market logic and neoliberal modes of legality and state action, all property-based, David Harvey (2003) offers a valuable perspective on the notions of ownership and identity when considering the urbanization process and built heritage. He explores the right to the city as a collective right where changing the city is inseparable from changing oneself and vice versa. Thus, blending **ownership and identity** formation.

"The city, the noted urban sociologist Robert Park once wrote, is:

man's most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself."

(Harvey, 2003, p. 939)

Moreover, placing the question of what kind of city we want to live in on a par with what kind of people we want to be (encompassing all dimensions of our relationships with others and the environment), Harvey (2003) points to the right to the city as one of the most precious human rights. Therefore, similarly to how our individuality is manifested through our daily choices and opinions, the collective identity of our city is manifested "through our daily actions and our political, intellectual and economic engagements" (p. 939). This resonates with Pratt's (2015)

interpretation of cultural resilience and "locality" and with the social innovation concept from earlier.

Lastly, when transferring the dual meaning of "right to" to cultural capital, his emphasis on the collective power over the processes of urbanization aligns with Throsby's (2011) principles of sustainable cultural development; hence, the personal and collective responsibility that participation and consumption entail.

ECOC and Participation

Finally, to contextualize the ECOC initiative and participation, we must examine the ECOC 's inclusivity principle which the European Commission refers to as foundational. (European Capitals of Culture, n.d.) It should be noted, however, that among the academic community, there is no lack of criticism of the ECOC policies related to the matter. (Nagy, 2018; Tommarchi et al., 2018)

Some studies suggest significant differentiation in terms of participation, especially between locals and experts. Such an outcome proves problematic because, despite claims of inclusivity, it reveals a clear divide and control over the ECOC 's planning and implementation. (Nagy, 2018) Hence, we refer to this phenomenon as "staged" inclusivity. While one could argue that locals may lack expertise in cultural programming, there are local experts, such as artists, cultural managers, and civil society organizations, whose involvement could enhance participatory governance. Nagy (2018) also argues that their involvement (through "open advice" practices) is merely considered instrumental and concludes that **participation** as outlined in ECOC policies aligns more with **representative democracy** rather than participatory democracy. Therefore, exploring participation in the context of our study could contribute to the analysis of the long-term effects these events can have on urban development.

After extensively reviewing the existing literature that such multifaceted phenomenon as urban development require, we argue that five essential themes prove significantly relevant in addressing the research question posed. The five themes encompass ownership, urban governance, cultural heritage, participation, and local identity.

III. Case Study: Plovdiv, Bulgaria

> *"I am the crucible of the future. I am where humanity will either flourish or fade. I am being built and rebuilt every day. I am inevitable. But I am not yet determined. I wish to be inclusive, innovative, healthy, soulful, thriving. But my potential can only be reached through you."*

1. SEE Cities in Transition

To understand the present, we must reflect on the past. Therefore, to contextualize the case of Plovdiv, we first reviewed some recent and some not-so-recent studies on urban change and resilience in post-socialist societies of Central and Eastern Europe, and respectively Eastern European Union cities. (Tsenkova, 2006; Stanilov, 2007; Bănică and Muntele, 2017)

According to Tsenkova (2006), the transitions to democracy, market economies, and decentralized governance were key drivers of the profound, but divergent, transformations of urban development paradigm in those states. (Bănică and Muntele, 2017) Below we outline generalized yet essential characteristics defining the post-socialist city by grouping them according to the defined themes:

Theme	Characteristics
IDENTITY	Urbanization-wise, these were highly industrialized and highly urbanized regions which after the collapse of the regime suffered severely from escalating inflation, unemployment, and poverty. (Tsenkova, 2006)
GOVERNANCE	Regarding the political and institutional landscape, the cities in Southeast Europe, and the Balkan peninsula, suffered from inefficient state performance due to corruption and weak public sector management. (Tsenkova, 2006) Decentralization of political, fiscal, and administrative power brought about enhanced local autonomy charging municipalities with myriad responsibilities regarding urban planning and development, but without adequate resources to manage them. (Tsenkova, 2006)
PARTICIPATION	Economy-wise, the recessions that followed in the 1990s were particularly severe due to the restructuring of state enterprises and

	services, shutting down or privatizing inefficient state industries, reducing state subsidies, etc. (Tsenkova, 2006)
	The communities living in those regions suffered from rapid impoverishment due to the absence of an effective social safety net, hence rising income inequality, and exclusion of some citizens to participate in society. The latter was particularly valid for the ethnic minorities, especially Roma communities. (Tsenkova, 2006)
OWNERSHIP	Regarding the built environment, the post-socialist cities are profoundly marked by the wholesale privatization of urban land and housing, transferring the ownership to private actors. Moreover, the policy of restitution of urban properties reduced the public space significantly, transferring many urban units into private hands, including some that were previously meant for public uses. (Stanilov, 2007)

Those changes undoubtedly shocked all aspects of urban life. Regarding the Eastern European Union cities' capacity for responding to these shocks, Bănică and Muntele (2017) distinguish two types of that resilience, namely "good" and "bad" resilience. While the former encompasses the preparedness, responsiveness and adaptation to the new regional and global challenges, the latter manifests itself in the resistance to change by propagating obsolete, inefficient, and harmful structures and practices, inherited from the totalitarian period. (Rufat, 2012, as cited in Bănică and Muntele, 2017)

2. Bulgarian cities and Plovdiv in Transition

Over the past three decades, the structure, role, and importance of cities in the Bulgarian settlement network have altered significantly due to all processes outlined above. Second-tier cities, such as Plovdiv and Burgas, are characterized by the territorial expansion of their agglomeration areas and both stand out as cities with a wide urban periphery, expanding economies, and vivid investment activity. (Ilieva et al., 2023) However, the imbalance between market trends and planning policy allowed for the market actors to dictate the use of their property with less concerns about the public interest and environmental sustainability. (Slaev & Nikiforov, 2013)

Zooming in on Plovdiv, Bănică and Muntele (2017) provide a comprehensive assessment of the city's resilience capacity (as of 2017) according to various indicators. The study encompasses 36 urban metropolitan areas and agglomerations from 12 EU member states whose resilience is examined through a set of indicators grouped in three categories: social, economic, and environmental. Plovdiv scores as some of the least resilient cities. Notably, amongst the urban settlements assessed in the paper, Plovdiv exhibits some of the highest population density in the inner area of the city and the worst air quality (together with Sofia) due to both traffic and polluting industrial activity in its proximity. However, compared to other cities, it is characterized by a relatively young population and mild suburbanization process creating a reserve for enhancing its resilience. (Bănică and Muntele, 2017) Therefore, one might conclude that since the 1990s onwards the city's image and quality of life suffered significantly.

3. Plovdiv today

Plovdiv, the largest city in Bulgaria's South-Central Region, was once a Neolithic settlement, a Thracian hub, a Roman cultural and economic center, and a capital of the administratively autonomous Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia. (Ancient Plovdiv, n.d.) Sitting on the banks of the Maritsa River, and amid several hills, the city serves as an educational, cultural, economic, and commercial hub. It is one of the six municipalities in Bulgaria with a fully urbanized population. (*Integrated Development Plan of Municipality of Plovdiv 2021 – 2027*, n.d.; *Ancient Plovdiv,* n.d.)

Besides having nine universities, Plovdiv is the largest industrial center in the country, particularly in high-tech production, ICTs, and knowledge-based industries. Furthermore, the region plays an essential role in the economic development of Bulgaria due to the Thrace Economic Zone project, which has boosted employment, foreign investment, and exports significantly. For the period 2014-2019, the city recorded a 55% growth in GDP and a 57% growth in GDP per capita. As of 2020, the population of Plovdiv Municipality was about 340,000 inhabitants, consisting mainly of Bulgarians, but there are also Armenian, Jewish, Greek, Turkish, and Roma communities. (*Integrated Development Plan of Municipality of Plovdiv 2021 – 2027*, n.d.; *Ancient Plovdiv,* n.d.)

Plovdiv is also a leading cultural center known for being amongst the oldest cities in Europe. With over 8,000 years of history, the city houses an exceptional wealth of cultural artifacts from various historical epics, different ethnicities, and cultures. Over 700 immovable

cultural properties are registered on the territory of the city. Two of the cultural ensembles are included in UNESCO's Indicative List. This rich cultural heritage serves as a vital resource for integrated and sustainable urban development. However, the conservation, preservation and display of the ancient monuments layered under the city's modern infrastructure impose significant constraints regarding urban governance. Between 2014 and 2020, the municipal budget allocated for culture increased annually to accommodate the 2019 ECOC event. In 2019 Plovdiv became the first Bulgarian city to be named the European Capital of Culture. (*Integrated Development Plan of Municipality of Plovdiv 2021 – 2027*, n.d.)

4. Plovdiv 2019 European Capital of Culture (2019 ECOC)

Plovdiv's candidacy for the European Capital of Culture began as a true grassroot initiative. In 2009, a group of active citizens gathered and exchanged information about the various stages, steps and deadlines surrounding the ECOC application. They decided to outline an action plan, prepare the necessary documents, and submit a proposal to the Plovdiv Municipality to allow the city to enter the competition. Two years later, in 2011, the civic initiative morphed into a separate municipal institution, Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, Candidate for European Capital of Culture. The newly established management board consisted of citizens and local government representatives alike. Everyone recognized that such a project would affect certain cultural policies and the city's infrastructure: from the environment and urbanization, through gastronomy, hospitality, and tourism to the development of transport links.

In addition, all parties involved realized that the application itself will give them the opportunity to develop multiple projects that a municipality would not normally undertake. Citizens and government officials united around a common concern that the city has an urgent need for international visibility. Plovdiv needs to change its image. The negative trends from the early 1990s ignited the idea that Plovdiv needs something big. Something to turn trends around, make noise and help people recognize the city again. Hence, ECOC 's scale and scope proved a suitable solution in achieving this goal.

4.1. 2019 ECOC Application

To define the concept around which the candidacy will be built, the Plovdiv 2019 team conducted a survey amongst over 80 focus groups, with the aim of finding out what the people of

Plovdiv think. The discussions seek to define what the city's residents like about Plovdiv and what they genuinely dislike about it. The initiators decided to build the concept on the two main arguments linked to what residents do not like about their city. The motivation behind their decision lies in the desire to use the European Capital of Culture as a mechanism to change locals' perception by changing the environment that surrounds them. The first pillar rests on the opinion that archeology and history are not interwoven in any way in Plovdiv's present, i.e., are not integrated into the lives of residents and guests of the city. The second one is related to the lack of empathy and understanding between the ethnic groups, in a comparable way that the city in the past served as an example of inter-ethnic harmony and peace. Plovdiv is currently inhabited by six ethnic groups. The largest Roma ghetto in the Balkans, Stolipinovo, is also part of the urban fabric.

4.2. "Plovdiv Together" (Пловдив #ЗАЕДНО)

("Together" sign in downtown Plovdiv. 2019. Personal archive)

The courage to bet on sincerity and transparency and emphasize the issues and shortfalls, rather than the givens and advantages, not only highlights the urgency to act but also underlines the high self-esteem and pride inherent to Plovdivians. This direction, however, ignited debates amongst the initiators and elected officials since the latter showed resistance in embracing the idea, especially regarding the Roma minority. Moreover, the debate expanded and led to some

polarizing opinions amongst citizens ranging from "Plovdiv desperately needs this!" to "Plovdiv is already a cultural capital. Why bother?!" In fact, between 2010 and 2014 activities around culture started gaining momentum, largely due to a few prominent artists and cultural operators working in the city. Furthermore, the local government had also implemented a 2014-2020 Municipal Development Plan recognizing culture as an integral part of sustainable urban development. However, in a city whose residents possess such a keen sense of pride urban development proves a problematic topic.

"Everything we are proud of in Plovdiv is problematic: history, diversity, culture, urban space, the sense of **together**ness." is the opening sentence in Plovdiv's Bid Book (phase I). Indeed, the document reveals a strong critical approach towards the city's then-state while also expressing the need to revive the citizen's trust in the city as a space to live together. The concept of "Plovdiv **Together**" is the center around which the entire proposal has been built. It is a commitment to re-unite urban spaces with the needs of the citizens, to bring minorities and majorities closer, and to connect people of different generations, religious beliefs, abilities, interests, and needs. Moreover, the proposal also emphasized the broken trust in public spaces as the "*agora*," resulting in Plovdiv losing "*its identity, its unity, and its connection to the European model of the city*". Politics and consumerism emerge as the two "abusers" of the public space. (*THE BID BOOK OF PLOVDIV 2019 (Phase I)*, n.d.)

4.3. Objectives of the ECOC Candidacy

Below we outline a summary of the main objectives listed in the Bid Book (phase I), again grouping them according to the five guiding themes. In addition to each main objective, we include the location(s) which ECOC interventions aim to activate. (See "Map 1" in Appendix D) for the exact location of each zone.) Then, we end this section with a brief overview of each of the ECOC's projects that prove important for this study.

Theme	Main Objective	Location/s
OWNERSHIP	Mobilize resources by integrating cultural and tourist development as parts of the long-	Kapana quarter (also Kapana Creative District)

	term city development. By upgrading both the cultural and touristic infrastructure. By resolving long-lasting uncertainty concerning the ownership of the cultural and historical sites which currently block development. By promoting the sustainable long-term integration of natural and cultural resources.	Tobacco Warehouses (also Tobacco City) Maritsa River (including Adata Island) 7 Hills (also "tepeta")
GOVERNANCE	Decentralizing the places for culture and events from the city center into the residential areas to revitalize the suburbs and enhance accessibility to these events, especially marginalized ones.	Stolipinovo Youth Hill Maritsa River
CULTURAL HERITAGE	Revitalizing the isolated landmarks of the city such as the Seven Hills and the Maritsa River through artistic intervention.	Maritsa River (including Adata Island) Youth Hill
PARTICIPATION	Blast the 'ghettos' removing social division and breaking up the "borders" between the groups. Engaging businesses and entrepreneurs in cultural processes and spreading the idea of business through culture. By promoting the perception of culture as a driving force and (creative) industry.	Stolipinovo Kapana quarter (also Kapana Creative District)
LOCAL IDENTITY	Position Plovdiv on the cultural map of Europe. Stop brain drain.	Plovdiv

Plovdiv 2019 ECOC / Urban areas

These projects feature the four urban areas/locations where most ECOC interventions have been directed. Hence, they serve as a focal point of our research.

1. "KAPANA CREATIVE DISTRICT" is a flagship project and one of its emblems, part of the TRANSFORM platform, within the Urban Dreams cluster, which aims at bringing about long-term sustainable interference into Plovdiv's cityscape, as well as rediscovering and revitalizing deserted city spaces by filling them with cultural content.

2. "The Tobacco City" is a flagship project, part of the TRANSFORM platform, within the Urban Dreams cluster, which aims at bringing about sustainable long-term interference into Plovdiv's cityscape, as well as rediscovering and revitalizing deserted city spaces by filling them with cultural content.

3. Maritsa River & Adata island. One of the most important elements in Plovdiv's ecosystem, but the citizens have lost their emotional connection to it. Aim: revitalisation of the river and the Adata Island, using culture, art and green innovation.

4. Stolipinovo & three more areas. Under the MAHALA cluster from the FUSE platform. Includes projects for integration of social, ethnic and minority groups. Its aim is to achieve maximum involvement and participation of the Roma and Turkish communities to help overcome barriers and stereotypes towards minorities and their territories and vice versa.

IV. Methodology

As discussed in Section two, we employ the "living city" metaphor to design this research design. The metaphor draws a parallel between urban and human metabolism emphasizing the role of stakeholders' diversity shaping the metabolic process. In this context, we consider cultural diversity as the variety of ethnic groups forming a given society and the ECOC event as a stressful situation (shock) testing the resilience of the entire urban ecosystem.

Given the exploratory nature of the research question posed, and the outlined theoretical concepts and context, we chose to utilize a more open-ended research strategy. The qualitative research approach accommodated our desire to collect rich, detailed data that could provide nuanced understanding of the studied phenomenon. Such methodology permits capturing the complexities of human behavior and the meanings that participants attach to their individual experiences. (Bryman, 2012b) Moreover, acquiring contextual understanding proves crucial when dealing with complex socioeconomic processes. As Bryman (2012b) highlights, qualitative social research proves highly adaptive and responsive to the research process itself. This level of flexibility allowed us to adapt our approach throughout the data collection phase, allowing for a more iterative process.

Regarding data collection, we opted for semi-structured interviews. According to Bryman (2012a) these strike a balance between structured and unstructured interviews while considering the conversational nature of interviews. Then, we compiled a list of questions, i.e., an interview guide (see Appendix A), so we could direct the interlocutors throughout our conversations. The chosen framework enabled us to delve into unexpected topics offering an opportunity to uncover new insights that structured interviews might miss. (Bryman, 2012a)

Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of three sections, each containing three to four questions and/or sub-questions. Questions were designed according to the outlined themes and subthemes, i.e., Codebook (see Appendix B). The first section invites the participants to introduce themselves and their role, involvement, and/or views on the ECOC initiative. The next section encompasses questions regarding the main challenges surrounding processes related to the ECOC's planning, implementation, and legacy. Section three then invites the participants to evaluate the efficacy of the ECOC initiative and reflect upon what has been accomplished and what not. Depending on the interviewee we explored some follow-up questions concerning the

lessons learned, potential opportunities for the city moving forward, and personal take on the role that ECOC's urban interventions have on urban resilience.

Criteria for Participant Selection

Next, we compiled a comprehensive set of criteria based on which to sample 10 to 12 interviewees. The criteria aim to provide a wide representation of the stakeholders involved and/or participated in the ECOC initiative. Regarding place of residence, priority was given to people from Plovdiv to ensure that the participants have a deep, personal connection with the local context. To achieve a balanced representation, the study did not impose any age or gender restrictions. However, preference is given to people over 18 years of age. The study welcomed participants of all ethnic backgrounds to promote inclusivity and ensure that the cultural and ethnic diversity of Plovdiv is reflected in the research. Participants were also selected based on their professional practice in several key sectors related to the ECOC initiative, namely: city administration; ECOC initiators; cultural managers; artists and/or creators; independent media and civil society representatives, and cultural entrepreneurs. (See Table 1. in Appendix D)

Sample

Due to the preliminary phone conversations and email invitations sent to potential participants, the author managed to interview twelve people in total. The interviewees share a homogeneous demographic profile: Bulgarian citizens between the ages of 25 and 65, and 10 out 12 live in Plovdiv. Also, all participants have a university degree. "Table 1" in Appendix D) provides details of all 12 participants in the study.

It should be noted that there are several limitations concerning the sample's representativeness. First, it includes only individuals of Bulgarian ethnic origin, thereby excluding contributions from representatives of other ethnic minorities living in the city, such as Roma community. Hence, this limitation could potentially skew the findings as it does not capture the diversity of experiences of the wider population. In addition, the absence of participants under the age of 35 limits the study's potential to represent the perspectives of the younger generation, potentially overlooking generational differences in experiences and perceptions towards the processes associated with the ECOC. Moreover, the sample consists entirely of literate and educated individuals, which may lead to biases inherent to this socio-economic group.

Given these limitations, we advise careful interpretation of the study's findings, as they may not be fully generalizable to the wider population residing in Plovdiv. Still, we made several attempts to contact individuals from the minority and age groups mentioned to ensure a higher representation of Plovdiv's residents.

Data Collection

The author conducted eleven in-depth online interviews via Microsoft Teams. All conversations were held in Bulgarian and videorecorded. To swiftly derive the Bulgarian transcripts, we uploaded each video file to an online platform offering free transcription services. Due to the limited availability of reliable web-based transcription tools for Bulgarian language, this process caused some difficulties and took a considerable amount of time to complete the transcriptions of all eleven recordings. Subsequently, we translated the Bulgarian transcripts into English using the online in-built translation feature in Microsoft Word. To ensure optimal accuracy and clarity, we carefully reviewed and refined all English translations.

Data Analysis

We initiated the data analysis process with color coding manually each English transcript. For this purpose, we assigned different colors to each of the five themes (ownership, governance, participation, local identity, and cultural heritage) and then went through all Word documents and marking excerpts from the participants' statements that match each of the five "codes." Considering the nuanced characteristics of the collected data, we also included two to three subthemes to each theme in the codebook. (see Appendix B) Next, we grouped the highlighted excerpts according to the five themes and transferred them to a separate file so we can organize, analyze, and summarize the gathered information to derive our findings. Hence, we interpreted the narratives and found repeating patterns and conflicting perspectives on several topics.

V. Findings & Discussion

1. Overview

Inspired by the opening words in Plovdiv's Bid Book, this study acknowledges that there are shortfalls regarding the 2019 ECOC initiative in Plovdiv; however, let us begin with the city's achievements. According to all interviewees, 2014, the year Plovdiv was announced as 2019 ECOC, truly invigorated the city. There was a lot of collective enthusiasm, heated debates for or against hosting the event, and of course, an increased sense of pride. Over the next five years, the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, Plovdiv Municipality, and Plovdivians actively worked to prepare the city to host the mega event and the expected flow of visitors from all over Bulgaria and the world.

It should be noted that this was the biggest project of its kind in Bulgaria related to the realization of major cultural events. It was also the biggest international project in Bulgaria related to culture. Looking from today's perspective, all participants agree that many zones in the city are developing because of the 2019 ECOC initiative.

Moreover, winning the European Capital of Culture title boosted Plovdiv's urban development in several aspects. First, the region experienced significant economic and demographic growth, and international recognition. Many Bulgarian and international companies have been attracted to invest in Plovdiv due to the title. The tourism industry has flourished since then. Several interviewees reported that the tourist season extended to ten months, with downtown hotels maintaining an 80% annual occupancy rate. They also argue that the city has become more attractive for residents and tourists alike.

Other participants noted that the entire process related to the preparation, planning and implementation of the ECOC initiative provided a rich learning experience and aided capacity building in the people who work in the cultural sector and beyond. Cultural operators are much more prepared, have more self-confidence, and established partnerships with other organizations, and festivals abroad. Moreover, some of the ECOC 's managers consider this effect as consequence of the decision to invest in content, organizations, and teams, instead of building new cultural infrastructure. However, other interviewees pointed out that the lack of new venues, pointing to the Plovdiv's Opera, for instance, proves a missed opportunity.

Participants from the city administration also noted a positive shift happening around allocating higher percentages from the municipal budget for culture. Hence, there is greater understanding of the role of culture in urban development and generally higher appreciation of

investments in cultural content. Some of ECOC 's initiators shared that companies from Plovdiv and the region have started to work more actively with cultural organizations. They also noted that civil society itself gained new self-confidence. Despite the tensions between NGOs and the political powers, the interviewees believe that the civic sector is more mature and demanding towards the local politicians because of the 2019 ECOC.

Critiques

Interviewees' main critiques towards the ECOC initiative gravitated towards two arguments. First, although the project started as a true grassroot initiative, during the preparation phase the Organizational Committee (Council) was outnumbered by the local government representative and thus many aspects of the planning were politicized. Second, despite developing the entire concept around "togetherness," the desired effect was not fully achieved, especially regarding the Roma inclusion. Indeed, "minority integration" and "avoiding too much political influence" were amongst the main challenges outlined in the Bid Book (phase I). Thus, one might argue that the strong political body manifested itself from the get-go, inflating the expectations through political narratives.

However, to contextualize these critiques, we must zoom out and have an overview of the overall political climate at that time. Between 2013 and 2017, Bulgaria was in a turbulent political situation, a stalemate concerning the parliamentary elections (early parliamentary elections in 2013 and 2014, local elections in 2015; presidential elections in 2016; early parliamentary elections in 2017). The rotation of several interim cabinets and high political uncertainty required ECOC's team to initiate discussions around planning and implementing the event multiple times. Every time starting from anew due to the lack of communication between the political powers competing for the mandate at that period. This resulted in a considerable delay regarding the infrastructural projects included in the Bid Book. Additionally, the delay of funding by the Ministry of Culture led to many unknowns and questions from the entire network of stakeholders.

There was no shortage of conflicts within the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation itself. In 2017, the management board of the foundation submitted its collective resignation with the argument of politicization of the initiative and lack of cooperation from the then mayor and chair of the council.

2. Results by theme

Below, we present the results of our study in detail following the already defined themes, namely: Ownership, Governance, Heritage, Participation, and Local Identity.

2.1. Ownership

The privatization of urban space, infrastructure, and built and natural heritage has been pointed out by most of our interviewees as the major setback that prevented Plovdiv 2019 from fully realizing the flagship initiatives planned in the Bid Book. The overall feedback is that only the Kapana district underwent a major change and transformed from an abandoned parking lot into a lively urban area. This was largely possible due to the ownership characteristics of the properties. Houses in Kapana are small and have clear property rights, compared to the Tobacco warehouses or Maritsa River. This allowed the Municipality to negotiate with the property owners and establish agreements that allowed the local administration to rent out the vacant spaces situated on the ground floor to artists and cultural operators.

Kapana Quarter (also, Kapana Creative District; "Kapana" meaning "Trap" in Bulgarian)

In just a few years, Kapana boomed and turned into a leading tourist site in Plovdiv. Currently, it exemplifies the 2019 ECOC main objective regarding ownership, namely, to mobilize existing resources by integrating cultural and tourist development. However, most participants question whether Kapana embodies the definition of cultural district. Shortly after hospitality entrepreneurs saw the potential for financial gains in Kapana, and the owners an opportunity to receive higher rents for their premises respectively, many of the artists, artisans, and gallerists moved out from the studios, unable to meet the excessive costs.

Currently, rents in Kapana are ten times higher than in the years before 2019, and the cultural operators active in the area have been pushed to the periphery of the quarter. Hence, the question whether Kapana is a cultural district, or it turned into a tourist trap (from Kapana meaning "trap" in Bulgarian) proves particularly valid.

As mentioned, the size of the property units in Kapana is relatively small making it problematic to create a profitable scalable model, and thus less attractive for large companies to invest in the area. Some developments in the so-called "Tobacco City," the second flagship project after Kapana, however, give us a rather different perspective.

(Kapana Creative District, 2018)

Tobacco City

The tobacco warehouses are a symbol of the flourishing tobacco industry in Plovdiv since the beginning of the last century. The buildings, donated to the city by their owner, were nationalized during the socialist regime, and most of them were active until the early 1990s. After the privatization processes in the country, however, their ownership passed into the hands of local businesspeople, and they were gradually abandoned.

Since 2000, an ensemble of warehouses located near the Plovdiv's railway station has been declared a National Architectural Monument. Their protection, however, ends with the obligation to coordinate any constructions and renovations with the Ministry of Culture. Since 2016, the warehouses' fate has become a frequent point of conflict between their owners, the municipality, the Ministry, and citizens. One of the warehouses was partially destroyed thanks to a doctored document, while three others were set on fire and are about to collapse. The fires

raised suspicions of arson among investigative journalists and residents. The situation around Tobacco City aroused a strong civil reaction and demands that the owners and the Ministry must commit to the restoration of the cultural heritage. Regardless of the public pressure, there has been no significant reaction in this regard so far.

In addition, our participants indicated that the owners' plans are to turn the warehouses into residential buildings with shops. Moreover, this is one of the last exceptionally large plots in the city center, which is not built, hence not monetized. According to our sources, there were attempts by some of the owners to silence the independent investigative media with bribes. What we also find out is that the property owners consider the renovation of the warehouses too costly and unprofitable. Therefore, they resist making any other investment different from demolishing them and building new residential units on top. The inability of the warehouses' owners to see the economic potential of transforming this area into a true creative district, coupled with the inefficacy of the state's institutions to handle such cases, threatens Plovdiv's cultural legacy, echoing the concerns the sustainable cultural development and "the right to the city" concepts raised in Section two.

Given all these circumstances, the city's aspirations of turning the tobacco warehouses into one of the main locations where the 2019 ECOC 's events to take place, thus, making a step forward in resolving long-lasting uncertainty concerning the ownership of the cultural and historical sites, were stymied. Apart from Plovdiv 2019 moving its office to one of the warehouses and hosting several exhibitions, nothing significantly changed after 2019. Currently, the warehouses accommodate a few sports facilities and offices of IT companies, yet no galleries or other cultural operators have activities in the area.

However, the Tobacco City and the surrounding infrastructure prove of even higher importance in the upcoming years. As the area holds potential for revenue estimated in millions of euros, the question of who the true owner of the warehouses is, hence Plovdiv's tobacco legacy, proves crucial and highly problematic in the coming decade. As one of our interviewees asked, then how can culture outbid such strong business interests?

Adata Island (and Maritsa River)

Adata, the largest privately owned island in the Maritsa River provides us with a similar example of unsuccessful long-term integration of natural resources due to ownership issues and institutional inefficiency. Located near the Plovdiv Fair and Stolipinovo (Roma ghetto), the place has been associated mainly with abandoned plot of land, recognized by homeless and Roma people. Despite its inclusion in the 2019 ECOC program, our participants argue that since then neither the island nor the river has undergone any lasting positive changes. Partly because almost all the island is under Natura 2000 protection, and interventions in the riverbed prove too complex due to institutional constraints. One of the interviewees, however, shared that he was aware of a project involving moving the city's aquapark, Aqualand, to Adata Island. Others talked about the potential of both sides of Maritsa River to become a 24 km recreational area. This situation again highlights the tension between private ownership and public interest, since rivers naturally belong to the city.

Comparing the three cases, one might argue that the relatively lower transaction costs in the case of Kapana turned out to be extremely profitable in the long term, where the higher costs related to Tobacco City and Adata island impose threats on sustainable urban development.

2.2. Governance

To start, let us first introduce the governance structure. Plovdiv has implemented a novel (for Bulgaria) governance approach to manage the European Capital of Culture 2019 project, based on the "micro-meso-macro" concept. The micro level encompasses individuals and small to medium-sized firms participating in the ECOC activities. The meso level represents the newly established Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, which includes representatives from Plovdiv's city administration, experts, and consultants, acting as intermediaries. At the macro level, the Plovdiv Municipality and Ministry of Culture oversee the organization and act as a bridge to similar stakeholders to ensure adequate management. Although novel for Bulgaria, this approach to ECOC's management mirrored the dominant top-down approach to city management.

However, most participants perceive positively the fact that Plovdiv 2019 Foundation still exists and continues to support and manage the city's cultural programme. According to one of its representatives, their work focuses mainly on financing the events that started in 2019. However, the organization completely transitioned from its grassroot origin into a fully institutional body acting as a mediator between the Municipality and the cultural operators. Notably, it also develops and deploys new programmes, open calls and strategic partnerships, and thus attracts European and national funds for the CCIs and the festival tourism in the city. This was also positively assessed by many interviewees.

Considering the decentralization of places for culture from the city center towards the residential areas, we found that most of the discussed urban interventions were, and some still are happening predominantly in downtown Plovdiv, with one exception.

In 2023, Plovdiv Stage Park, the newest event venue, opened at the foot of the Mladezhki Hulm (meaning Youth Hill; also called Dzhendem tepe). As one of our interviewees explained, the project is funded by the EEA and Norway Grants which aim at contributing to social and economic development in the Baltics and Central and Southern Europe. The festival venue offers bazaar spaces, four scenes, and a food area. According to another participant, the venue's owner used to manage a space in Kapana district. However, he decided to move his projects away from the city center to provide a more suitable setting for open air seasonal events. Several interviewees expressed positive impressions about Stage Park since it contributes to the urban environment in ways akin to Plovdivians.

Youth Hill, however, is one of Plovdiv's hills declared protected territory. Since the 1970s, its southern part and the surrounding area have been under natural landmark protection aiming to preserve the natural habitat of several plant species. (Palotás, 2020) Nowadays, the

park on the hill is a popular area for recreation. Considering all this, it can be argued that Mladezhki Hill serves as an example of successful revitalization of isolated landmarks, hence ECOC legacy. However, large-scale decentralization could not be considered since only one cultural project operates outside of the central city areas. Moreover, such interventions could become an example of the commercialization of cultural and natural capital if not responsibly managed as seen in Kapana's commodification.

Cultural Rift

According to several interviewees, there is a significant cultural rift between politicians and cultural operators, stemming from a fundamental misalignment in their understanding of "culture." To illustrate, we will use an example given by our interlocutor.

Politicians often cite artists like Hristo Yavashev-Christo, as a successful artist who did not benefit from state subsidies but found a working business model to support himself and his art. The artist we spoke with shared that this is an exceptional case, and that similar success cannot be expected for the entire cultural sphere due to the nature of the product they are offering. The discrepancy in the understanding of "what culture is" leads to the inefficiency of the state institutions responsible for the management and preservation of cultural assets. According to some participants, politicians are afraid of the potential of culture to change society, and therefore funds from the state budget for cultural development in Bulgaria have been minimal for decades. In addition, other participants reported that the preparation and holding of Plovdiv 2019 caused significant progress for civil society. While the politicians remained at the same level, unable to recognize the potential of the cultural sector.

Transparency and dialogue

Regarding transparency and dialogue between those in power and citizens, some participants shared that Plovdiv 2019 regularly provided updates and reports on the project's developments, however, the same could not be stated for those in power. This lack of communication hampers effective interaction among organizations active in cultural, social, and civil systems, thus leading to fatigue and demotivation among many citizens. However, this issue is pervasive at the national level as well, where the failure of state representatives to unify and support meaningful projects did not miss the 2019 ECOC initiative.

Kapana and Stolipinovo

      The two major ECOC projects were mentioned as the projects controlled by the local government the most. Kapana exemplifies the top-down approach of Plovdiv Municipality to implement copy-and-paste strategies to artificially create cultural districts in pursuit of economic growth. Five years after the mega-event, the area is a home for the hospitality industry rather than the creative. If we are to consider the 2019 ECOC as "random event" then indeed, it initiated the formation of new district, but Kapana transformed into a district for leisure activities due to the dynamics akin to the hospitality industries.

      Stolipinovo, on the other hand, emerged as another example of the top-down approach of the local authority. Highlighting Stolipinovo as part of the ECOC project met considerable resistance from the then-mayor's office. Some participants shared that the disagreement between the municipality and the initiators led to significant conflicts, but not meaningful results in terms of the Roma integration. Hence, one might conclude that since Plovdiv municipality took over the control of the Plovdiv 2019 foundation, they concentrated their attention and effort on Kapana. The inability of Plovdiv Municipality to recognize the untapped potential that the diverse cultural, hence ethnic, expressions could possess, servs as a transition to our next theme, namely cultural heritage.

2.3. Cultural Heritage

      Kapana's transformation provides valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between deliberate interventions and unexpected consequences. **Kapana Creative District**, situated in the city center and being an architectural monument, proves to be considered as the greatest achievement of the 2019 ECOC initiative. To socialize the isolated quarter and spread the idea of business through culture amongst local entrepreneurs, Plovdiv Municipality invested in light infrastructural upgrades and pedestrianizing the streets, while the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation invested in cultural content. Moreover, most interviewees agree that if it was not for the 2019 ECOC initiative, Kapana's revitalization might not have happened. Currently, the area is the most visited tourist site, generating hundreds of thousands in revenue for the municipal budget.

      Notably, the initial plan to transform it into a "creative district," most participants do not consider as achieved. They argue that Kapana did not become a quarter driven by the CCIs, instead it is now a quarter for leisure activities. They also acknowledge that the project changed

the urban environment and revitalized the area successfully. This effect they regard as a positive lasting ECOC legacy.

Most of the criticism, however, relates to the flawed assumption by those in power that the creative sector alone can revitalize the neighborhood. Instead, it became clear that Kapana's popularity grew due to the dominance of restaurants, entertainment, and nightlife. The neighborhood now hosts hundreds of micro and small businesses, generating significant profits and supporting over a thousand jobs. This economic impact, as positive as it is for the city, also has its negative implications. The rapid pace of gentrification has displaced the artists from the neighborhood and replaced them with mostly profit-driven actors. Thus, the combination of the initial, start-up-like investment in Kapana and the market principle supporting local hospitality entrepreneurs contributed not only to the socialization of the quarter, but also to its commercialization and commodification. The latter poses new challenges regarding Kapana's identity, the local culture, and their sustainability in the future.

According to our interviewees, both **Tobacco City** and **Maritsa River** (including Adata Island) possess significant value as cultural and natural resources respectively. Moreover, the potential for profitability and scalability of **Tobacco City** as described in the Bid Book proves as testament of Plovdiv's ability to dream boldly. Yet, many shared that the project was overpromising and overambitious due to all dependencies regarding the ownership and investments needed. Despite the efforts of Plovdiv 2019 to find sideways and show how with small investment the district can be revived, the idea of business through culture has not resonated with the owners to this day. Notably, some of the participants explained that the resistance of making a Kunst Hale there proves significant since the area seems as if "put on hold" and the large investors simply wait for the right moment or the right people in power. Hence, one might only speculate that the right time will come when the warehouses collapse.

Maritsa and Adata, on the other hand, also have true potential to become an integral part of the city's urban fabric as envisioned in the 2019 ECOC application. Although Maritsa separates Plovdiv in two, it could become a centerpiece of recreational activities and a pedestrian zone, connecting citizens from north and south. However, as mentioned above, profit-seeking actors coupled with poorly performing institutions on state and local levels, could potentially hinder the revitalization of the city's isolated landmarks and transform them into mere commodities.

Lastly, the positive lasting effect of the 2019 ECOC initiative could be found in the debates that have sparked among citizens because of its intentions and results. Shedding light on both urban areas as spaces for gatherings could potentially direct the public discourse towards promoting sustainable cultural development and perceiving those spaces as transmitters of **local culture**.

2.4. Local Identity

According to all residents who took part in the study, the 2019 ECOC initiative has successfully positioned Plovdiv on the world map, hence further strengthening Plovdivians' inherited sense of pride and belonging to the city. Moreover, they agreed that the mega event contributed significantly to shifting Plovdiv's image in a positive direction, with many asserting that the city held a cosmopolitan aura throughout 2019. Another positive effect of the initiative, some participants highlighted, relates to the newly acquired wealth of cultural conceptualists and well-prepared talent working in the cultural field. Others point to the enhanced understanding and appreciation of culture amongst inhabitants as ECOC's legacy. This process has led to a more demanding public, with Plovdivians becoming more selective in their tastes and preferences.

Interestingly, one of the interviewees noted that in 2019 there was a notable emphasis on fostering empathy and unity among Plovdiv's diverse communities. The same participant also shared that the initiative brought ordinary citizens together, thus creating shared spaces and nurturing their sense of collective identity. However, Plovdivians' inherent pride and high self-esteem charged the initiative and its outcomes with significant expectations. While the 2019 ECOC reinforced the city's sense of greatness, it also resulted in an excessive focus on petty things. This tension between pride and pettiness highlighted both the strengths and limitations of Plovdiv's local identity during this period.

According to other participants, however, the initial momentum generated by the 2019 ECOC seems to have faded and the expected long-term impact of such a mega event is hardly noticeable. They consider the restraining effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, but nevertheless share a feeling that Plovdiv has started showing signs of provincialization. Some also believe that the initial goal of activating the community and infusing a new identity in the city has not been fully realized.

Notably, several interviewees shared the opinion that a large part of the cultural activities happening in the city today are largely organized by people from outside Plovdiv. A sign of a change in the local cultural dynamics leading to the loss of the previous vital inner enthusiasm and diminishing cultural capital. Kapana exemplifies this process well.

Kapana

A key phase of the "Kapana Creative District" project was the series of open calls inviting independent cultural operators, NGOs, and artists to relocate to Kapana. By offering a year of rent-free space to like-minded individuals to develop their practices, the Plovdiv 2019 foundation aimed to foster creative activity within the district. Initially, this effort brought a palpable sense of a genuinely artistic environment. Some artists we interviewed recall that by 2018, Kapana became a symbol of what a collaborative, artist-driven community could achieve. However, it also infused the district with a rather utopian spirit, providing a somewhat unrealistic glimpse into its potential as a cultural epicenter. After Kapana boomed and turned into what it is today, a thriving space for culinary experiences, the idea of a place for high culture also transformed into a place for mass culture.

According to several interviewees, the same statement could apply to the type of public and tenants the quarter attracts today. One that enjoys mainstream activities, and one that provides mainstream activities, respectively. They also express concerns that Kapana's visitors and business owners do not share the same values and ethics as those who initially entered the quarter and succeeded in continuing their activity despite the high rents. Oftentimes, there are clashes between "locals" and "newcomers" regarding how the architectural heritage of the quarter should be treated. Locals try to lead by example, however, at times it seems that they are turning into "padari" (guardians) of the local life and culture. The latter turns out to be an increasingly challenging task. Considering the lack of appreciation of culture by the mass consumer it further complicates the situation forcing local (cultural) entrepreneurs to choose between maintaining the culture or their turnovers. Consequently, many Plovdivians who feel the same tensions avoid visiting Kapana and even mentioning it.

Several participants shared that the city is experiencing a deteriorating spirit of cooperation and artificially induced tension between cultural operators in the city. The loss of solidarity combined with an environment of constant competition seems to have driven residents away from their favorite places. In addition, some point out that the main flaw of Plovdiv after

2019 is its passiveness towards the preservation of important landmarks such as Kino Kosmos (Cosmos Cinema) and the Tobacco warehouses.

In line with this notion, several projects worth mentioning emerged during the interviews. One is about a photography festival with 40 years of tradition. However, this year could be its last edition due to lack of support and recognition by the local government. The next one, "Night of the Museums and Galleries," launched in 2006 and it became an annual celebration of Plovdiv's heritage, leaving a lasting mark on locals' self-esteem. However, 2019 was its last edition due to a rift between the event's founders and the then mayor. The last one, "Plovdiv Typeface," was held in 2019 as part of the May 24th celebrations of the Cyrillic alphabet. The initiative launched by the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation quickly gained momentum and attracted many citizens to contribute to creating a collective typeface based on Plovdivians' handwriting.

All three projects entered the 2019 ECOC's cultural programme and were evaluated by several participants as great initiatives that nourish the local identity and in turn, are nourished by it. Although, two out of three projects ceased to exist after 2019 and one struggles to find proper recognition, what all of them highlight is how vital participation is for nurturing a resilient local (urban) identity.

2.5. Participation

Much like culture, participation also encompasses layers of various connotations. In our case, we focus on three aspects: stakeholder diversity, representation, and social cohesion.

Stakeholder Diversity

To foster broader participation among citizens, Plovdiv Municipality and Plovdiv 2019 Foundation adopted the "Open Calls" model inviting various stakeholders to engage in the initiative. This approach provided a mechanism for many independent artists, cultural organizations, for instance the "chitalishte" (local cultural centers), and art networks, to debut and participate with their own projects in a process which until then was not a familiar practice to many. Due to the 25 open calls, nearly 600 projects got funded, many of which were successful, according to one of our interviewees. Moreover, Plovdiv 2019 launched a volunteer programme inviting citizens to get involved in the implementation of the ECOC initiative. Consequently, over 100 direct partnerships with artists and organizations from Europe were established and over 2000 volunteers registered on the platform. In addition, the team embraced

the "full transparency" principle providing updates and reports regularly. Notably, in the final monitoring filed with the European Commission, the "citizen engagement" criteria scored the highest.

One of the ECOC's initiators also shared that before and during 2019 there was a revival in the civil sector. Considering that the initiative itself started as a civic project and was based on the motto "Plovdiv Together", it was surprising for us to learn about the drastic disparity in how the success of the initiative (in terms of participation) is assessed by its initiators and leaders on the one hand, and the representatives of the civil sector on the other. From the former's perspective, the ECOC proves relatively successful compared to what was planned in the Bid Book, while the latter perceives it as unsuccessful, especially considering the Roma integration.

Representation

The public discussions that the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation and the Municipality held during the preparations for 2019 largely resembled the "open advice" practice discussed in the literature review earlier. The introduction of this approach was supposed to attract the attention of the local community and encourage open conversations to increase trust and transparency regarding the interventions planned by the local authorities. Accordingly, debates on urban topics related to Kapana, Tobacco City, and Kino Kosmos most often served as mechanisms for engaging citizens without necessarily leading to any concrete results, however. This practice reflects the principle of representative rather than participatory democracy. Hence, one might conclude that this approach to representation is in line with Nagy's (2018) criticism of the ECOC's often "staged" inclusivity.

When asked about the volunteering opportunities for citizens and the inclusion of Roma, two of our interviewees who are active in these fields expressed frustrations. According to one of them, the institutions responsible for implementing the mega event did not prioritize citizens' participation in terms of volunteering. Consequently, this led to an ineffective model regarding engaging Plovdivians, thus placing civil organizations in a position to "save" multiple programme events at the last moment. Furthermore, the organizers and the municipality overlooked the efforts and time needed for the civil sector to motivate and mobilize volunteers. Notably, informal phone conversations and reliance on personal acquaintances were common practices. These personal dependencies and lax practices indicate a lack of systematic dialogue and long-term planning, resulting in ineffective and demotivating interactions for citizens. One

participant also argued that currently civil society is marginalized and not recognized as a partner by the Plovdiv Municipality. Post-ECOC, the lessons regarding citizen engagement seem not to have been learned, leading to repeated mistakes and the ongoing exclusion of citizens from decision-making processes.

Social Cohesion

Blasting the "ghettos" (Roma integration) and breaking up the "borders" between the social groups (Social cohesion) were among the components with the highest emphasis in Plovdiv's Bid Book. In this sense, several participants agreed that many small-scale projects aimed at fostering engagement across various ethnic communities did happen in the city. These initiatives seemed in line with Plovdiv's motto "together," matching Plovdiv's diverse cultural fabric and unique appeal. Despite these efforts, however, the lasting effects of the ECOC initiative have been questioned by the people we interviewed. Most criticized the success of these interventions, suggesting that while the projects concerning Roma inclusion were well-intentioned, their long-term efficacy remains debatable. Thus, one might conclude that the initial desire to bring people together morphed into a "staged" togetherness, exercised largely through the behavior of the local government.

However, would it be realistic to expect a single year (or five years) to solve such deep issues that have been neglected by many parties for decades?

Addressing the challenges of integrating the communities living in Stolipinovo and the other Roma quarters requires a fundamentally different urban governance and management style. Some participants argue that to effectively work with marginalized groups there must be a political will and municipal mechanisms driven by genuine desire, motivation, and a coherent strategy. Moreover, when a ghetto perceives itself as self-sufficient, the breakthrough proves extremely complex and demands specific interventions.

The segregation of the Roma communities is a bi-directional process, characterized both by the social isolation imposed on them and by their own withdrawal from society. This is why several participants consider it important to look for occasions and initiatives for rapprochement close to the Roma identity. Projects related to dance and music, two intrinsic features of Roma culture, can serve as channels for cultural expression and potential pathways to wider societal integration.

According to one of the experts we interviewed, another reason for the lack of lasting effects lies in the fact that access to Stolipinovo is controlled (if not monopolized) by two large organizations operating in the area, and with ties to the city administration. Moreover, these organizations present themselves as the main entities capable of managing and organizing the area, convincing the municipal authorities of their reliability. Despite the significant financial investments, amounting to millions of leva, that the two organizations have managed over the years, the tangible effect of their activities remains questionable. Hence the suspicions of corruption schemes.

Without belittling the participatory initiatives undertaken by the Plovdiv 2019 foundation, and the city administration in general, the participants concluded that the legacy effects of the 2019 ECOC have not resonated in time nor have significantly altered Plovdiv's cultural fabric.

3. Discussion

3.1. Implications & Recommendations

Based on all the conclusions above, our study would like to suggest a set of recommendations and directions for future research.

Several positive trends have been developing over the past 10 years, for sure. However, the main challenge is to fully capitalize on these trends. The question is how society and public authorities can stimulate these processes together and guide them in a positive direction without compromising the integrity of the city. We need to carefully consider the issues discussed above.

Not everything from what Plovdiv dreamed of and hoped for materialized. That does not mean it is not possible to bring it to fruition in the future. We argue that the ECOC initiative, being a first-time experience for Plovdiv, and Bulgaria, provided the city with new knowledge and capabilities, new lessons to be learned, and exposed and highlighted some already known traits of the local community. It is important to be aware of the political landscape this initiative unfolded. However, these circumstances should not be used as apologies, rather to contextualize the expectations and effects towards the initiative.

Therefore, given the rich **cultural heritage** of Plovdiv, characterized by its multi-layered and time-tested nature, we believe it is important that politicians and citizens work together, guided by the principle of adaptive reuse. In recent decades, Bulgarian society has gone through

(some social strata are still going through) scarcity, poverty, and a range of crises. Looking ahead, however, its ability to adapt to these shocks and transform the limited resources available can serve as a resilience reservoir when applied to the planning and management of the urban environment.

Such an approach to urban development is not new. The principle "Never demolish, always transform for and with the inhabitants," followed by the French architect Anne Lacaton, offers a starting point for the transformation of the Tobacco Warehouses, for instance. Renovating them undoubtedly requires a large investment of time and resources, but it is bearable if it is distributed among enough diverse participants. Our conversations with the interviewees made it clear that the people of Plovdiv recognize the warehouses as their collective heritage and want to pass it on to the next generations. If they are given an adequate opportunity to be involved in the restoration process, many will likely do so. An opportunity that considers their skills and competencies, from rebar reinforcement to the choice of typeface on the entrance sign. This, however, would require synchronization among many stakeholders and potential legislative changes, thus increasing the transaction costs. Starting with small yet incremental changes and interventions would eventually reveal the true potential of culture to drive significant economic growth, which the current property owners prove to be shortsighted. Zooming out, the tobacco industry's legacy may even connect Plovdiv to Asenovgrad and other settlements in the region where the remnants of that exciting period lie dormant. Similarly, the integration of the Maritsa River is also a time-consuming and resource-intensive project. Distributed among enough participants, however, the investment in its revitalizing is within the power of Plovdivians.

Citizen participation, however, is a two-way process. Citizens themselves must also engage with what is happening around them, taming their pride, bringing forward collaboration and scaling it, starting from the garden in their block and reaching large infrastructure projects like the urban railway. Civil society can seek and model its own mechanisms for regular check-ins of such projects. Sporadic public hearings upon initiating a given project have proven to be ineffective. Consistency and regular pressure on the contractors and the city administration are needed. A start in this direction could be the so-called citizens' assemblies held at the neighborhood level. A randomly selected but broadly representative group of people living in the community is brought together. Over several months, this group examines a given issue in depth along with the policies needed to solve it. For instance, budget and legal constraints related to

potential interventions. The collaboration is then initiated by a series of hearings involving the stakeholders. Next comes working hard together to find common ground on a shared set of recommendations. The configurations of these groups, accordingly, would look different for each neighborhood and period, reflecting the dynamics of the resilient-enhancing processes occurring in living organisms.

Moving on to the role of the local government. The top-down approach applied so far needs to be rethought. The human organism lives thanks to the fact that not one, but several vital systems work together. Therefore, the political system needs to work together with the civil, cultural, and social counterparts. The municipality should loosen control over Plovdiv's development and start recognizing the other systems as equal partners. There is no need for loud projects or large actions, but for small, meaningful ones that accumulate over time and add to the city's identity.

Lastly, it became clear that identity and ownership are inextricably linked. Whether individual or collective, these social constructs embody our culture and legacy. What makes a person or a city distinct is based on the kind of properties they have and, most importantly, care for.

3.2. Limitations & Future Research

It should be noted that the present study has several limitations regarding the methodology chosen and the representativeness of the sample. On one hand, the qualitative approach poses challenges regarding the study's reproducibility. On the other hand, generalization of the conclusions should be avoided due to their subjectivity arising from the author's personal interpretation of the data. Furthermore, the limited sample size also limits the generalizability of the findings and their acceptance as valid to a wider population.

In addition, the homogenous profile of study participants limits the sample's representativeness. This homogeneity risks distorting the conclusions reached due to cultural and other biases akin to that social group. To improve the generalizability and applicability of the findings to a wider population, we encourage future research to aim for a more representative sample that includes wider ethnic and age groups.

As the ECOC initiative has a more direct relationship with cities and their heritage, along with the event itself and the region of Southeast Europe being less researched compared to other mega-events and European regions we consider it important to focus our research on the 2019

ECOC and Plovdiv. However, we encourage future comparative studies, for instance, between Plovdiv and other Bulgarian or Southeast European cities. Additionally, comparative studies situated within the cultural sector itself, such as high culture versus underground culture, could also provide valuable insights into the legacy effects of ECOC. From a policy perspective, investigating the extent to which the ECOC accounts for differences in the social, economic, and political landscape of relatively heterogeneous European cities would be intriguing.

VI. Conclusion

Given today's political, social, economic, and ecological context, we argue that studies like ours focusing on Southeastern Europe prove important. The results of our research could eventually enrich the broader discourse on urban development strategies in Europe and bring Western and Eastern European countries closer together, further uniting our societies and strengthening urban resilience.

Considering the legacy effects of the Transition on Southeastern European cities, we argue that the post-socialist city offers intriguing avenues for (further) investigation. What this research sought to achieve was to deepen our understanding of socioeconomic shocks affecting the urban development trajectories in the SEE region. In doing so we examined the 2019 ECOC initiative in Plovdiv comparing it to a small-scale socioeconomic shock that challenges the city's resilience. Our focus was on exploring the legacy effect of the ECOC initiative on Plovdiv's current urban development. To address the research question, we drew insights from many academic works, and outlined five key themes related to our study: ownership, governance, cultural heritage, participation, and local identity. Next, we suggested incorporating the "living city" metaphor since it proves as suitable component to guiding our research. The metaphor slightly expands the concept of urban metabolism by drawing parallels between the human and urban "microbiome," highlighting the importance of cultural diversity in such a dynamic process. We then employed a qualitative research approach conducting 12 online in-depth semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders. After collecting the raw data in Bulgaria, we proceeded to interpreting the results. In our analysis, we followed the five themes above which allowed us to reach a set of conclusions and suggest recommendations and possible avenues for future research.

Our findings showed that Plovdiv's citizens were first to discover the ECOC mechanism as a possibility to change the city's image and boost regional economic growth. Although the grassroot formation that initiated the application process in 2010 managed to secure the funding, many argued that the then political body overtook the management board of Plovdiv 2019 foundation, thus controlling the projects' implementation through pronounced top-down approach. However, the ECOC event succeeded in positioning Plovdiv on the global tourist map and regenerating an abandoned urban area in downtown Plovdiv, achieving a few of the main objectives included in the Bid Book. The weighty investments in Kapana district turned it into and still is the most visited site in Plovdiv, generating revenue of millions of leva in the

municipal budget and employing over 1000 people in the hospitality industry. Most interviewees agreed, however, that the initial intention to transform Kapana into a creative district failed since many artists and creatives were displaced from their studios and replaced by mainstream activities, restaurants, bars, etc.

Moreover, regarding the other objectives outlined in the Bid Book, most participants criticized the results echoing the critical approach Plovdiv adopted for its ECOC candidacy. They acknowledge that between 2014 and 2019 many small yet intriguing initiatives, projects, and events, along with public debates on critical urban issues have been realized. However, none of them managed to have a lasting effect. Their claims were largely directed toward the unsuccessful revitalization of the Maritsa River and the Tobacco warehouses, and the failure of blasting the "ghetto." Indeed, many highlighted that the integration of Stolipinovo was the prime focus of the initiative, and perhaps the very reason for Plovdiv to win the rase in the first place. Facing resistance from the then local government to place the Roma community at the forefront of Plovdiv coupled with the monopolized access to the area, stagnated significantly the potential reach and impact of the initiative. Hence, one might conclude that the initial plans built on the truly humanistic concept of "togetherness" to foster social cohesion materialized but in a somewhat "staged" manner.

Speaking of limited impact, the failed revitalization of both Tobacco City and Maritsa River (including Adata Island) exemplified how strong business interest coupled with private ownership could endanger the preservation of cultural and natural capital, hence highlighting the importance of embracing the notions of the "right to the city" and sustainable cultural development.

What all our conclusions seek to highlight is the urgent need to rethink the notions of ownership, governance, participation, and local identity when it comes to cultural and natural heritage, and to support policymakers and citizens alike in seeking novel models for cooperation based on participatory democracy and adaptive reuse principles.

Finally, a common impression that all conversation left on us relates to the multifaceted nature of the Plovdivian identity. On the one hand, locals did not shy away from expressing their sense of pride and belonging to such a culturally rich city as Plovdiv. On the other hand, they reflected on the flaws such high self-esteem could bring and dared to hold themselves accountable for their successes and failures regarding the ECOC initiative and its legacy effects. If there was one thing everyone agreed on, it was that Plovdiv and its citizens have all the

capacity, talent, and resources needed to direct its social, economic, and cultural trajectory into a more equitable and sustainable future. A future where the concept of "togetherness" is deeply embedded in all aspects of city life, directing Plovdivians' sense of pride towards collaboration. After all, Plovdiv was the place where the North and South of Bulgaria were brought together and unified in 1885.

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Intro/Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research! The study focuses on exploring how various urban interventions shape urban environments and their legacy effects regarding the 2019 European Capital of Culture in Plovdiv.

By participating in this interview, you are contributing to a greater understanding of how urban areas (and communities) evolve and respond to cultural initiatives, and vice versa. I appreciate your insights and experiences, as they will help shape my research and identify potential recommendations to policymakers, urban developers, and/or cultural managers. In my research approach, I employ the concept of urban metabolism by drawing analogies between the processes happening in the urban and natural world. Let us imagine the city as a living organism with all its inner systems and characteristics. Take the streets, for instance. They serve as veins and arteries, distributing resources, hence energy and information, throughout the city. Sometimes, shocks or triggers (either internal or external) can throw the city's systems out of balance, exposing or causing (symptoms of) inflammation in certain city areas.

Through our conversation, I hope to explore your experiences and observations regarding this phenomenon and to learn more about the challenges, opportunities, and impacts of the work you are involved in. Let us begin!

I. Motivation and Goals

1. Could you please introduce yourself and tell me more about your role and/or involvement in the 2019 European Capital of Culture? What motivated you to participate in this initiative?

2. What specific cultural initiatives or projects were implemented during Plovdiv's year as the European Capital of Culture? What were the primary goals of these initiatives?

3. Were the local communities involved in the planning and implementation phases of the COC initiative? In your view, has the initiative sought to reflect Plovdiv's cultural diversity?

4. Were there any significant changes and/or adaptations regarding the urban infrastructure? (Such as streets, parks, buildings, etc.)

II. Challenges and Opportunities

5. What were the main challenges you associate with the ECOC initiative and the subsequent interventions in Plovdiv?

    a. How did you and/or your team address these challenges?

6. Can you discuss any instances where the cultural initiatives caused disruptions or required changes to the city's systems, such as traffic flow, access to public spaces, or other public infrastructure?

7. In your opinion, what opportunities emerged from the cultural interventions that led to improvements in Plovdiv's urban environment?

    a. What lessons did you learn that could benefit future cultural initiatives?

8. How did the local community respond to the ECOC initiative and related interventions

    a. Were there any unexpected outcomes or reactions that impacted the projects?

III. Vision and Impact

9. How do you see the long-term impact of the European Capital of Culture on Plovdiv's urban environment and cultural landscape? Are there any ongoing projects or initiatives inspired by the 2019 experience?

10. As far as you know, were there any measures taken to ensure the sustainability and legacy of the ECOC -related cultural initiatives in Plovdiv?

11. Given the concept of urban metabolism and the analogy of the city as a living organism, how do you see the relationship between cultural initiatives and the "health" of Plovdiv's urban environment?

12. What are some future opportunities or areas for development that you think Plovdiv should focus on in terms of culture-related urban interventions?

APPENDIX B) Codebook

Themes	Subthemes
Urban Governance	Top-down & Bottom-up Approaches
	Corruption
	Lack of dialogue and transparency
Ownership	Property ownership / legal rights
	Right to the city / collective right
Participation	Stakeholder diversity
	Social cohesion
	Representation
Cultural Heritage	Commodification
	Financialization
	Socialization/Revitalization
Local Identity	Plovdivian identity
	Agency
	Sence of belonging
General information regarding the 2019 ECOC	Plovdiv's candidacy
	Goals and objectives
	Intentions and Expectations
Plovdiv's urban areas and/or quarters related to the ECOC initiative	Kapana Creative District
	Adata Island /Maritsa River/
	Tobacco City
	Stolipinovo /Roma ghetto/
	Other urban areas

APPENDIX C) Concept Mapping
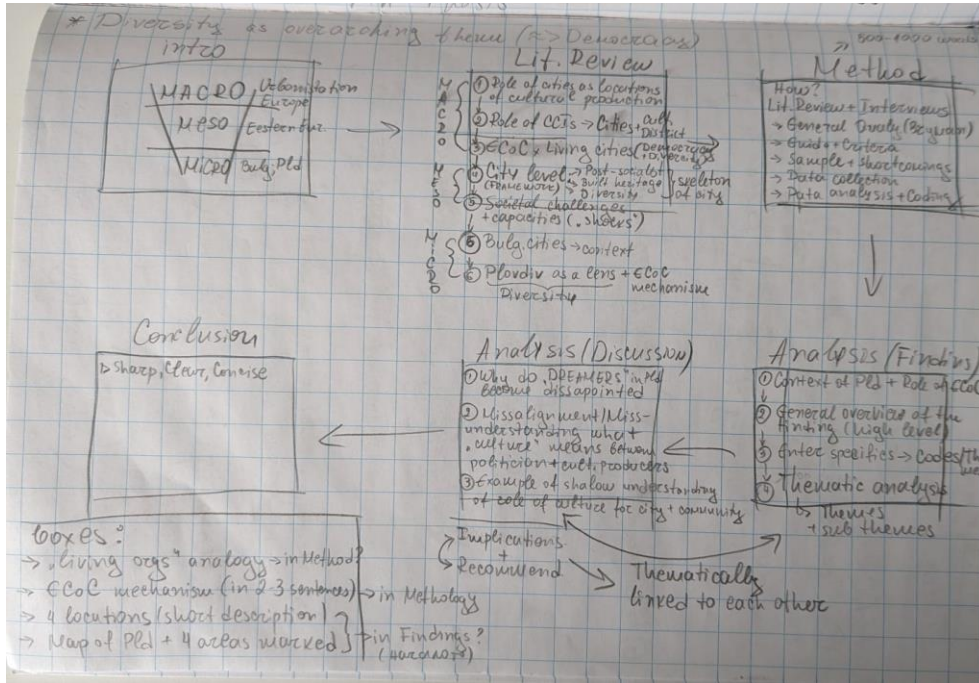
(Storyboarding)
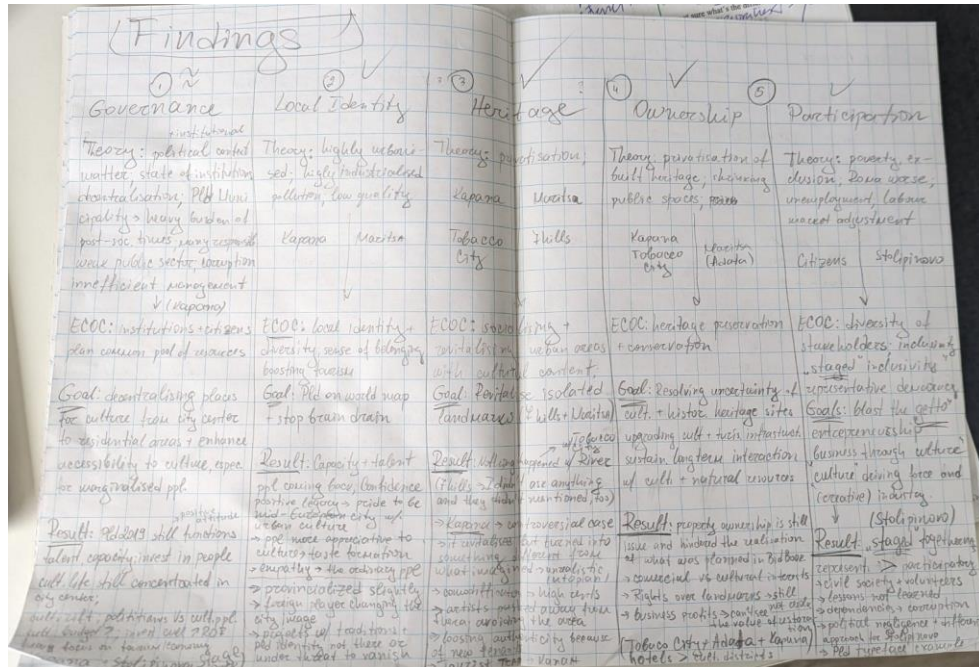
(Concept mapping)

APPENDIX D) Tables & Graphs

Table 1. Sample of Participants

Participant / Criteria	Residency	Gender & Age range	Education	Occupation	Role in 2019 ECOC
Participant #1	Plovdiv	Male, 45-55	Tertiary	Business owner, B2B	Public administration
Participant #2	Plovdiv	Male, 35-45	Tertiary	Manager, Consultant	ECOC manager
Participant #3	Plovdiv	Male, 45-55	Tertiary	Journalist, co-owner	Independent Local Media
Participant #4	Plovdiv	Male, 45-55	Tertiary	Entrepreneur, co-owner	Independent Local Media
Participant #5	Plovdiv	Male, 25-35	Tertiary	Journalist, co-publisher	Independent Local Media
Participant #6	Plovdiv	Female, 45-55	Doctoral, EdD	Business owner, Comms	ECOC initiator
Participant #7	Plovdiv	Female, 45-55	Tertiary	Teacher	Illustrator / Citizen
Participant #8	Plovdiv	Female, 55-65	Tertiary	NGO representative	Partner, Volunteer program
Participant #9	Plovdiv	Male, 35-45	Tertiary	Owner	Design Studio/Partner
Participant #10	Sofia	Male, 35-45	Tertiary	Architect	Festival Director
Participant #11	Sofia	Female, 25-35	Tertiary	Artist	ECOC participant
Participant #12	Plovdiv	Female, 55-65	Tertiary	Co-founder, Foundation	ECOC participant/Partner

Map 1. Locations of Plovdiv's urban zones under study

Numbers indicate the approximate location of all five areas discussed in the study.

1 KAPANA Creative District
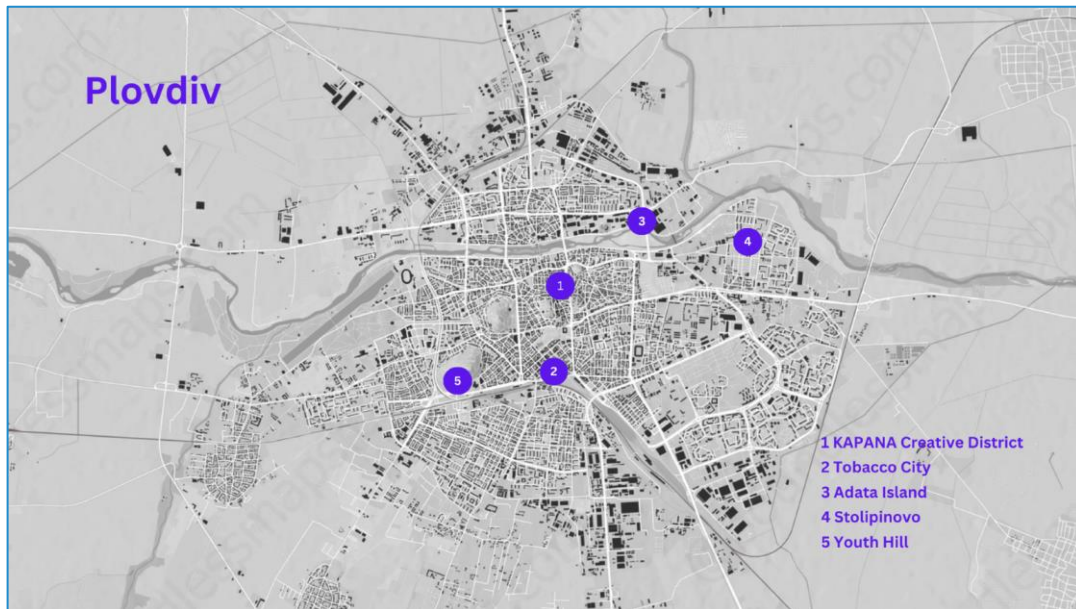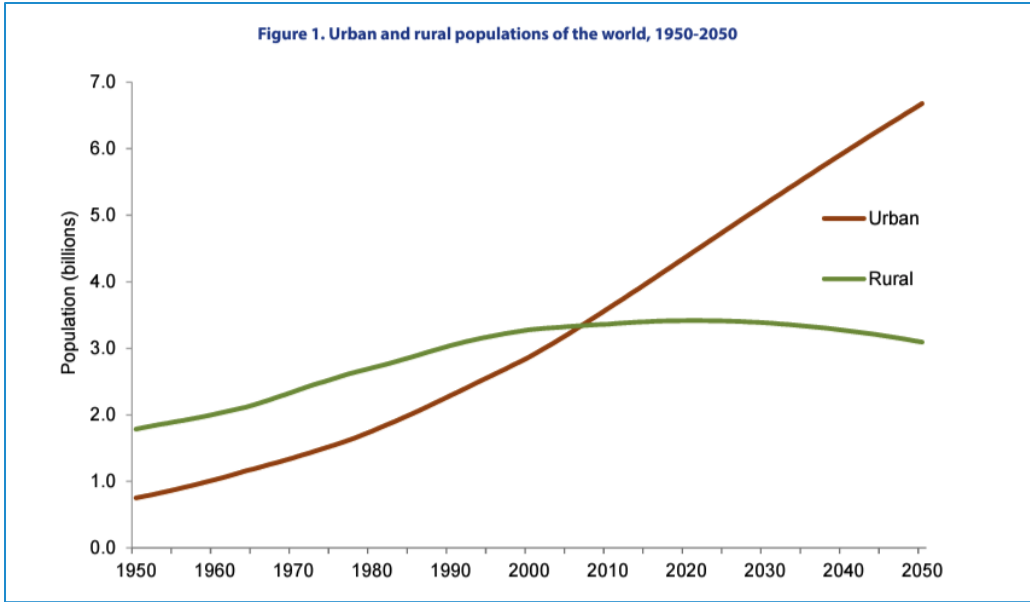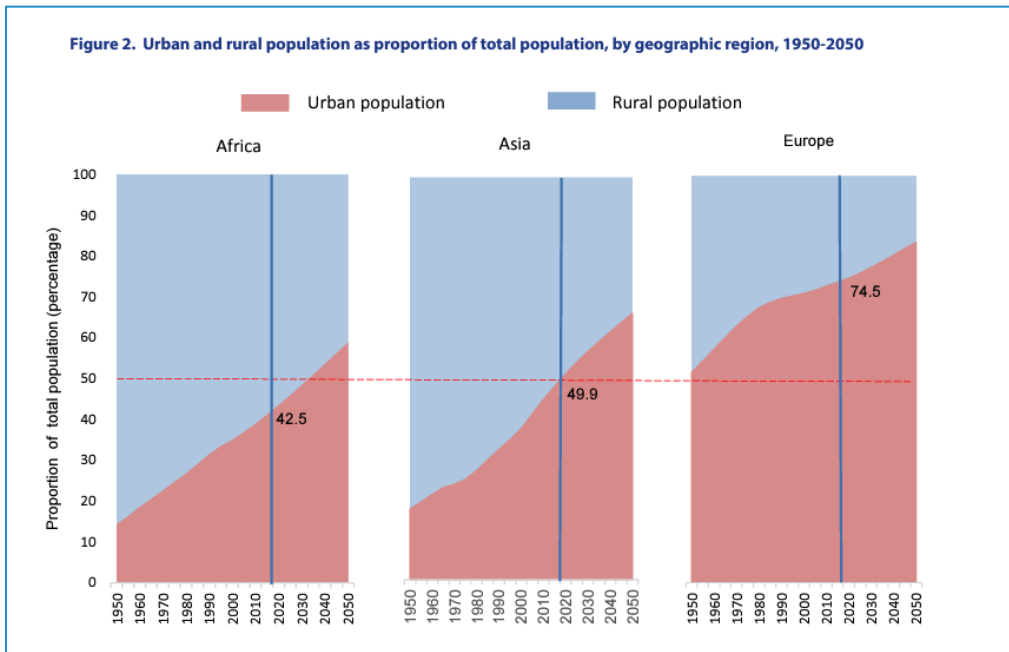2 Tobacco City
3 Adata Island
4 Stolipinovo
5 Youth Hill

Figure 1.

Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018a). World
Urbanization Prospects 2018.

Figure 2.

Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018a). World
Urbanization Prospects 2018.

APPENDIX E) Additional visuals

1. Kapana Creative District

2018-2019

2. Tobacco City

(2019)

Tobacco City Archives

"През 1923 г. в Пловдив съществуват 30 тютюневи къщи, които разполагат с 32 склада за манипулация и съхраняване на тютюни, от които 20 са построени за тази цел. Те представляват 4-5 етажни масивни сгради, изградени в централната част на града. През 1929/30 г. вече стотина фирми и индивидуални играчи се заявяват като тютюнотърговци. Тютюн е складиран и в къщата на д-р Стоян Чомаков – днес постоянна експозиция на знаменития художник Златю Бояджиев. Тютюнотърговецът Антонио Коларо превърнал в тютюнев склад дори красивата къща на Аргир Куюмджиоглу – днес Етнографски музей, но общината е изкупила имота и го запазила за бъдещите поколения. Цели квартали с тютюневи складове, строени така, че и днес представляват интерес с местонахождението и здравия си градеж. Респектират с обемите си, някои и с украсата си."

Пенка Калинкова

"In the year 1923 Plovdiv comprises 30 tobacco houses that has 32 tobacco stores for tobacco manipulation and storage 20 of which are built for this reason. They represent 4-5 – stories massive buildings situated in the central part of the city. In the years 1929/30 hundred companies and individuals claim to be tobacco traders. Tobacco has been stored also in the Dr. Stoyan Chomakov house – today it is a constant exposition of the famous painter Zlatiu Boyadzhiev. The tobacco trader Antonio Kolaro transformed in warehouse even the beautiful house of Arguir Kuyumdjioglu – today Ethnographic Museum – the Municipality has bought the place to protect it for the future generations. Whole neighborhoods with tobacco warehouses are built in a way that even today the building arouse interest with their locations and the solid construction."

Penka Kalinkova

http://tobacco-city.plovdiv2019.eu/

THE PROGRAM OF PLOVDIV 2019

Cluster "Urban Dreams", of which the "Tobacco City" project is part, is devoted to artistic intervention in public spaces, and aims to revitalise and open up dysfunctional spaces, buildings and objects. For the projects in this cluster we will work with local and international partners and artists in order to exchange know-how and best practices as well as to open up a discussion on the European level about problematic architectural heritage in the contemporary context.

ПРОГРАМАТА НА ПЛОВДИВ 2019

Раздел „Градски мечти", в който попада и проектът „Тютюневият град", е посветен на артистични намеси в публичното пространство и цели чрез творчески дейности да се оживят и обновят проблемни пространства. Развитието на проектите залага на партньорство с местни и международни организации и артисти, за обмяна на опит и добри практики, както и за осъществяване на дискусия на европейско ниво за проблематичното културно наследство в един съвременен контекст.
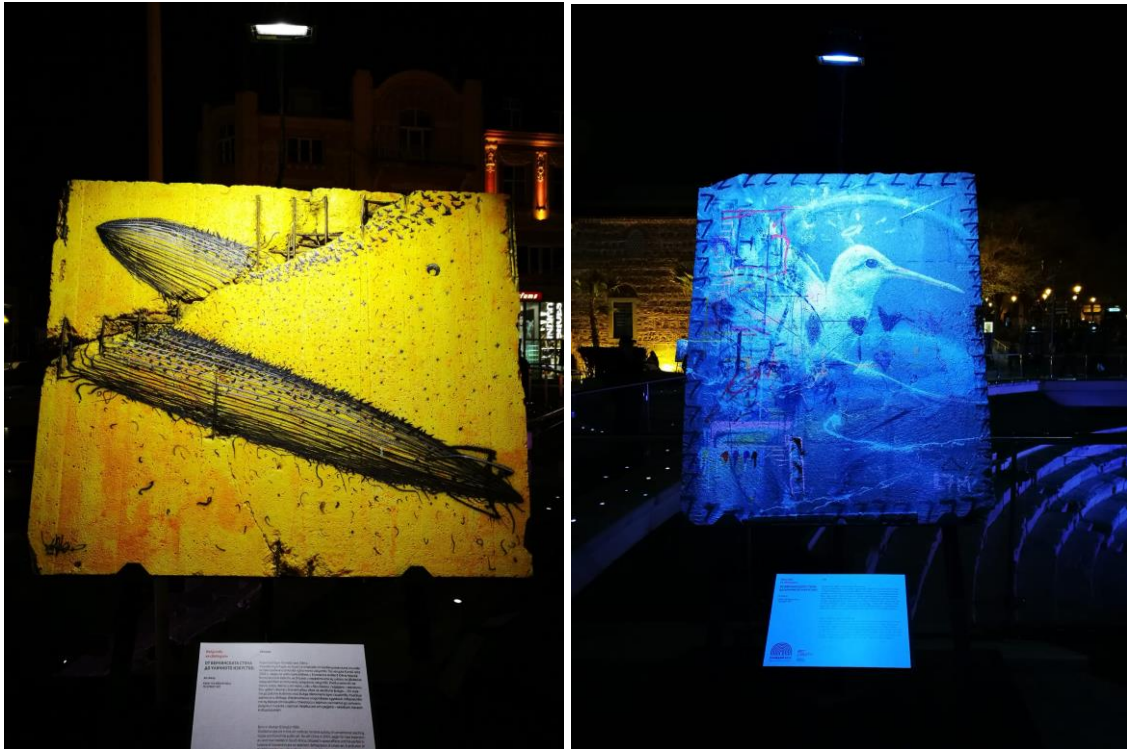
http://tobacco-city.plovdiv2019.eu/

3. Plovdiv 2019 ECOC

(2019)

Pieces from the Berlin Wall exhibited in downtown Plovdiv in 2019

Night in Plovdiv (2019 edition)

4. Others

Left: Views over Plovdiv from Nebet tepe (Nebet Hill)

Right: Live Concert, Nebet tepe (Nebet Hill)