FRAMING THE BID

THE FIELDS OF TENSION BEHIND THE SCENES OF BELGIUM'S 2030 EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE BIDS

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ABSTRACT

There is a vast amount of academic literature concerning the ECOC initiative. However, existing research focuses predominantly on the legacy and outcomes of designated ECOC cities. The early stages of the process remain underexplored and thus undertheorized. This thesis aims to investigate the bidding process itself, before cities are designated the title of ECOC. Although the bidding stage has been discussed in relation to specific topics, there is a lack of frameworks that map the complexities that arise when bidding for the ECOC title. Although every ECOC process is entirely unique due to the specific DNA of every city, there is a need for a framework that identifies common obstacles. This research explores the behind-the-scenes dynamics of the bidding processes of Namur, Leuven and Molenbeek, the three shortlisted candidates to become Belgium's European Capital of Culture (ECOC) in 2030. Through a qualitative case study approach, conducting thematic analysis based on seven in-depth interviews with people creating these bids, this study has identified eight 'fields of tension'. Through a combination of inductive and deductive research, these are the eight themes that surface as challenges and pressure points for bidding teams. They offer an overview of how bidding teams actually experience the process. The fields of tension include 'local identity and European narrative', 'navigating the European Commission', 'inter-city dynamics', 'phase transition', 'stakeholder management and governance, 'balancing mobilisation and uncertainty', 'artistic integrity' and 'the business of the ECOC network'. The findings show on the one hand that there are certain universal struggles and adversities that shape the bidding process, and on the other hand provides an in-depth analysis of the three Belgian bids by comparing how they each approach these. While some of the findings are expected results, others are rather surprising and invite future academic research. In doing so, this thesis promotes transparency about the bidding process and reflects on the policy surrounding the ECOC, combining both academic and practical relevance.

ECOC – bidding process – fields of tension – European identity – stakeholder management – governance - challenges

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European Capital of Culture (ECOC) is a cultural policy initiative that has existed for four decades. Every year, one, two or three cities are elected European Capital of Culture. As decided by the European Parliament and the council for the years 2020 until 2033, two European countries are elected for a national competition in which cities can compete to hold the title for their country. Besides these two, potential candidates and members of the EFTA/EEA countries can bring forth a third European Capital of Culture in 2021, 2024, 2028, 2030 and 2033. With support of the European Commission, elected cities have five years to create a cultural program for their ECOC year.

The program aims to shed light on the diversity of European cultures while at the same time uniting Europeans through culture and heritage. Throughout the years, its scale has exponentially grown and its scope expanded: the ECOC objectives and goals for both the European Commission and partaking cities have become multi-faceted. It has grown from a cultural initiative to an economic, social and political initiative (Garcia & Cox, 2013).

Belgium has had the opportunity to bring forth European Capitals of Culture more than once. After the success of Antwerp (1993), Brussels (2000), Bruges (2002) and Mons (2015), the country has once again been selected for the title. In 2030, Leuven, Namur or Molenbeek will be the fifth Belgian ECOC, alongside one city from Cyprus, and one from an EFTA/EEA country. As a country, Belgium is well acquainted with the European Union: its capital already hosts the seat of the EU.

As a Belgian citizen myself, this topic sparked my interest for personal reasons. The city I was born and raised in, Kortrijk, was longlisted for the title of ECOC2030. Initially, being familiar with the cultural landscape, that was the chosen topic for this master thesis research. However, by the time the shortlist was created and Kortrijk was no longer included, it was clear there was still a unique opportunity at hand to discuss the bidding process of the shortlisted cities. Besides, I am also familiar with Leuven's cultural and social fabric, having lived there for 3 years.

The ECOC initiative brings many different sectors, people, and places together. Cities around Europe compete for the title not only for the year-long spotlight, but because the programme has become a powerful instrument of urban transformation,

regional development and European integration. Studying the ECOC matters for several reasons. Firstly, it offers a unique lens on how cultural policy can drive economic growth or regeneration. However, its long-term economic benefits vary dramatically from city to city, depending on among others local governance, capacity, infrastructure and strategic choices. Secondly, the programme shapes social outcomes: it can create a sense of pride within local communities, increase cultural participation and subsequently strengthen social cohesion. Beyond economic and social prosperity, the ECOC aids the European Union's ambition to unite in diversity. As a form of soft governance, the ECOC helps cities, and by extent countries, align with European ideals. It is a rather complex and layered cultural event, each time highlighting different aspects of the initiative itself, of Europe, and of the partaking cities. From the outset, cities are faced with numerous challenges and equations that appear only solvable by themselves, because every city's trajectory is defined by its unique characteristics and context.

Since the investment has shown to pay off over recent years, cities are investing increasingly more resources into their bids (Richards & Marques, 2016). The bidding process has become a major undertaking in itself. And yet, most research focuses on the post-designation legacy rather than the very critical phase of bid preparation, which is when bidding cities have to face strategic, political, artistic and practical challenges. Any studies about the early stages of the process are still mostly focused on what the outcome of the bidding process will be, when it is in fact crucial to turn our attention to *how* cities craft their ECOC bids.

This research delves into everyday decisions, trade-offs and pressure points that bidding teams encounter internally in 2024. By doing so, we uncover key areas of concern, 'fields of tension', that influence how Namur, Leuven and Molenbeek shape, structure and conceive their bids. The main research question is: When reflecting on the bidding process of Leuven, Namur and Molenbeek to become the Belgian ECOC in 2030, what are the main fields of tension and how do they experience and negotiate these? This sparks some more operational subquestions: What internal and external challenges do bidding teams encounter? How do teams interpret the ECOC framework as they create their proposals? And to what extent do these fields of tension, challenges and interpretations differ or align across the three cities?

Focalising on the bidding process is not only relevant, but needed: by mapping these fields of tension, this study highlights the best practices and pitfalls when organising effective bids, managing ambiguous criteria and mapping out future bidding processes. Thus, future applicants and municipalities can design more realistic, coherent strategies that anticipate governance bottlenecks and normative pressures. Besides, this study could be a testimony for needed changes in terms of the EU's policy around ECOC. Furthermore, studies like these fill in a scholarly gap and open the door to further research on ECOC bidding.

This thesis is structured as follows: in chapter 2, a literature review provides the needed background information about the ECOC initiative, the policy surrounding it and the bidding process. Then, chapter 3 provides a more detailed lens through which this study is conducted. It gives an overview of the themes that are relevant to this research and have been explored in academic literature. Theory around European identity and stakeholder management and governance are all discussed and linked to hypotheses for the outcome of this research. Chapter 4 explains how this research is designed, conducted and analysed. Chapter 5 gives an overview of the findings of the analysed data, sorted by eight fields of tension: 'local identity and European narrative', 'navigating the European Commission', 'inter-city dynamics', 'phase transition', 'stakeholder management and governance, 'balancing mobilisation and uncertainty', 'artistic integrity' and 'the business of the ECOC network'. Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the findings and reframes this research in the big picture again. The thesis ends with a conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a necessary (non-exhaustive) overview of the context in which the bidding process has come to exist, and how it has been discussed academic literature. Subchapter 2.1 offers an introduction to how the ECOC has changed since its conception, in order to understand what it is today. In the interest of understanding the conditions under which the bids are created, an overview of the policy of the European Commission is provided in subchapter 2.2. Subchapter 2.3 discusses the existing academic literature in regards to analysing the ECOC initiative and the bidding process.

2.1. The Historical evolution of the ECOC Initiative

As part of an overarching, European, cultural strategy, the ECOC initiative started in 1985 in Athens. During the first years of the initiative, the cities elected were great epicentres of culture in Europe: Florence, Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris (1986-1989). These early ECOCs showcased the fine arts through projects with limited longevity, as they did not involve long-term strategies or investments (Richards, 2000).

Glasgow's ECOC project in 1990 signifies a turning point. It differed from its five predecessors as it was not an internationally recognised cultural player. On the contrary, Glasgow faced social and economic challenges. The UK government utilised the ECOC title to counterfeit this and ignite a change in the city's image (Griffiths, 2006). Glasgow's cultural rebrand is considered an ECOC success, and became a precursor to many 'declining cultural centres without a major cultural reputation' (Griffiths, 2006, p. 418). Since then, there has been a trend of cities participating that are smaller, medium-sized cities, economically or socially challenged. Winning the ECOC title became not just about highlighting existing culture and fine arts, but also about boosting culture again, and about using the title as a lever to instigate change and uplift and position the city, on more levels than just the cultural sector.

In 2000, the European Commission elected nine cities to be joint Capitals of Culture. Starting in 1999 however, for the elected cities of 2005 onwards, the selection of cities becomes the responsibility of the states themselves, which is done through national open competitions (Nermond & Lee, 2021). Every year, candidate cities of 2 member states go through an extensive selection process, creating bids 5 years in

advance during multiple rounds. In both countries a winner is selected by a panel, consisting of independent experts selected by the European Commission, and independent experts selected by the state in question. The first eastern European city to be elected ECOC is Vilnius in 2009 (Sianos, 2017). The UK held the most rigorous selection procedure to date in 2012, when 12 longlisted cities had to compete in a preselection, after which 6 made the shortlist until eventually Liverpool seized the victory (Griffiths, 2006). The success of this competition ignited UKCOC, the UK's quadrennial ECOC equivalent.

Garcia and Cox (2013) highlight 4 changes in the selection and funding processes since the beginning of the ECOC initiative. Firstly, the objectives broadened from showcasing Europe's shared cultural heritage to also pursuing regional economic impact and development. Secondly, the profiles of selected cities have shifted from major capitals to smaller, often regional cities, with bids increasingly encompassing surrounding areas. Thirdly, the funding model was revised. The Melina Mercouri prize (named after the Greek minister who started the initiative), which at first provided unconditional funding from the EU, became a conditional prize, with host city performances being strictly monitored. This difference is noticeable for bidding cities, especially heightened by the steady rise in expenditures from all bidding cities. The current Melina Mercouri prize accounts for 1.5 million euros, which is only a small part of the investment required (Richards & Marques, 2016). Lastly, the evaluation of ECOCs has become mandatory, systematic and increasingly stronger, and emphasises the need for the ECOC title to be embedded in a long-term cultural strategy (Garcia & Cox, 2013).

2.2. ECOC Policy

Initially, the European Union excluded culture as a device to unite its different member states, limiting itself to its economic objectives. However, over time, it became apparent that uniting different member states under one banner also requires social cohesion and cultural integration. The EU cannot introduce any laws about culture for its member states. Thus, the EU's authority in cultural matters has been formalised but remains confined to coordination, integration and support initiatives (Sassatelli, 2008). The ECOC programme is one of those initiatives.

In order to analyse the ECOC bids, it is essential to have an exhaustive understanding of the requirements brought forward by the European Commission, as well as their objectives. The Commission communicates very transparently and openly, and publishes their documents online. For 2030, three European Capitals of Culture will be designated: one in Belgium, one in Cyprus and one in an EFTA/EEA country, EU candidate or a potential candidate state. For all countries, this designation happens under the formal framework set out in Council Decision No 445/2014/EU (with amendments in 2017 and 2020) which contains all information related to goals, criteria and procedures (European Commission, 2014/445). Besides, the European Commission has published a 'Guide for cities preparing to bid' for candidate cities European Commission, 2017). The following summary focuses on the current rules, requirements, objectives and priorities of the ECOC programme that relate to the 2030 bidding process.

In regards to the objectives of the ECOC initiative, the European Commission is brief yet concise. The table below provides an overview of the objectives for European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033 (European Commission, 2012/407; European Commission, 2014/445).

General objectives
To safeguard and promote the diversity of cultures
To highlight common features of cultures in Europe
To increase citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area
To foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities in accordance with their respective strategies and priorities
Specific objectives
To enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities, including through transnational cooperation
to widen access to and participation in culture
to strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors
to raise the international profile of cities through culture
Operational objectives
to stimulate extensive cultural programmes of high artistic quality
to ensure cultural programmes feature a strong European dimension and transnational co-operation
to involve a wide range of citizens and stakeholders in preparing and implementing the cultural programme
to create new opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural events
to improve cultural infrastructure
to develop the skills, capacity and governance of the cultural sector
to stimulate partnerships and co-operation with other sectors
to promote the city and its cultural programme
to improve the international outlook of residents

Table 1 *EU objectives for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020- 2033 (personal creation)*

The selection process starts six years before the ECOC year in question. Candidate cities are requested to hand in bid books, which contain their proposals written in long form, maximum 60 pages. A preselection determines a number of cities to proceed to the selection round, in which the Belgian process finds itself currently. The shortlist of cities includes Namur, Leuven and Molenbeek for Belgium, Larnaka and Lemesos for Cyprus, and Lviv and Nikšić, respectively in Ukrain and Montenegro. After having received feedback on the first bid books, a second round of bid books with a page limit of 100 pages is expected to be handed in during the summer of 2025, followed by an oral presentation

for the independent jury panel and the eventual announcement of the winner in September in Belgium, and for the winner of Cyprus and the EFTA/EEA countries before the end of 2025 (European Commission, 2023).

Thus, the entire approach of the candidate cities to translate these objectives into concrete plans and projects, has to be written down into these bid books. In order to standardise these bid books and make sure that the written plans are assessable, the European Commission has brought forth six criteria. These six themes are simultaneously the obligatory chapters of the bid books and the criteria of assessment for the jury (European Commission, 2014/445):

1. Contribution to the longterm strategy
2. European dimension
3. Cultural and artistic content
4. Capacity to deliver
5. Outreach
6. Management

'Contribution to the long-term strategy' relates to the impact of the ECOC year and a plan to secure longevity, 'legacy', after it ends. 'European dimension' asks cities to explain how they will highlight European culture, cultural diversity and how they will commit to benefit mutual understanding and cultural exchange between European citizens. 'Cultural and artistic content' requires an explanation for the vision and strategy to deliver an artistic program and involve the local cultural landscape of the city. 'Capacity to deliver' highlights the need for a political support network and the infrastructure at place to realise the project (transport and accommodation). 'Outreach' questions the involvement of local citizens and requires bidding cities to assure they can reach all their different communities and attract audiences. 'Management' refers to realistic plans in relation to finance, governance, marketing and communication (European Commission, 2014). The European Commission has created a set of questions for each of these criteria. Bidding cities can formulate responses to these in their bid books, which further helps to uniform the bids, ensuring readability and enabling assessment for the jury.

As this subchapter shows, there are many objectives, goals, motivations and criteria involved with the ECOC initiative, both for the European Union and bidding cities. Bidding candidates are encouraged to create bids that are as exhaustive as possible, that provide answers to all challenges, questions and objectives at hand. However, cities consist of a unique fabric, woven by their own communities, political context, geographical location, social characteristics, history, artistic landscape, financial means etc. Therefore, these standardised criteria and objectives form different challenges for each of the bidding candidates.

> Different member states have engaged in the process of European integration for a variety of reasons and thus differ in the priority they attach to particular policy issues and in their perceptions of the institutional outcomes necessary to achieve their particular policy preferences. (Fella, 2002, p. 4)

Fella (2002) notes that different actors within the EU bring diverse historical experiences, priorities, and conceptions of integration, making consensus difficult. This dynamic is clearly mirrored in how cities (like member states) bring different motivations and local realities to the ECOC process. Subsequently, they face differences in how they interpret and apply the programme's ideals, leading to diverse narratives and even tensions with aligning themselves with a standardized European vision. Just as states have to compromise in EU policy-making, cities do so in bid narratives.

2.3. The ECOC Initiative and Bidding Process in Academic Literature

A cultural event of the size of the European Capital of Culture can be a catalyst for a wave of change in the city, region or even country it inhabits. These changes have been discussed extensively in academic literature.

Oftentimes, studies discuss ECOC cases in terms of their economic consequences, which can be studied through for example tourism development, job creation or revenue (Garcia & Cox, 2013; Liu, 2014a; Richards, 2000). However, results show that there is no real noteworthy, long-lasting impact on the local economy of an

ECOC that extends beyond the year of the event, but that does not speak for the cultural and social importance of the initiative for cities. As Nermond and Lee (2021) put it: 'While the long-term impact might be small, this doesn't mean that no attention should be paid to legacy. But the legacy might be in terms of improved organisation structures or cultural development, rather than a short-term economic shock' (p. 11). Thus, in regards to the social and cultural impact of the ECOC, numerous studies have also been conducted (Cicerchia, 2015; E. Dova et al., 2022; Goldin & Sevin, 2013; Liu, 2014b; Tursie & Perrin, 2020). Additionally, the ECOC initiative's potential for regenerating cities, placemaking city branding is widely discussed too (Bianchini et al., 2013; Cox & O'Brien, 2012; Liu, 2015; O'Callaghan & Linehan, 2007). There is no consensus in regards to the success of past ECOC cases, and consequently there is also discord about how to assess success academically (Ooi & Hakanson, 2014).

It is remarkable that the impact and development of European Capitals of Culture and other cultural-economic rationales are relatively well-documented. Almost all of the aforementioned studies are case studies of specific ECOC cities, as all cities go through a unique trajectory. This makes comparative studies and generalisations only harder. Therefore, there are numerous ways in which scholars have viewed, studied and critiqued the ECOC.

Similarly, academic research into ECOC bids specifically has been conducted from diverse angles and with diverse methodologies. Yet, research about the bidding process is limited. There are different perspectives to approach the bidding process, but also different methods to analyse this crucial initial stage of becoming a European Capital of Culture.

Before 2005, there were no officially composed guide lines for ECOC bids, making it harder to find commonalities overarching bids. As a result, there was a lack of consistent material to analyse before. However, since then, the bidding process has become more structured, regulated and monitored, making it easier to conduct research in regards to the bidding process.

Garcia and Cox (2013), two recurring writers in the landscape of academic publications regarding the ECOC, have identified multiple returning characteristics of bids that can be linked to the success of the city within the ECOC frame. They did so through engaging with the ECORYS report analysing bids from 2005-2018 written by

Rampton, McDonald and Mozuraityte in 2011 (pp. 53–64). These success factors include: evidence of local commitment to the project, using the ECOC to achieve long-term development goals, having strong concepts and themes, having a high-quality artistic program, having a high involvement of citizens, having relationships with previous ECOCs and mirroring EU rhetoric, and maintaining broad stakeholder consultations with different partners, and building on an existing, long-term strategy (Garcia & Cox, 2013). Mons for example, the most recent Belgian city to be ECOC in 2015, already started developing plans for its bid in 2004 and had an overarching theme called 'where technology meets future,' which was based on the already existing hi-tech strategy for economic development in the city (Rampton et al., 2011).

Although a high quality artistic programme is a requirement for success for bidding candidates, ECOC organisers have expressed that rather than proposing an actual event programme, which needs time to be developed, they would focus on developing a unique vision. Furthermore, 'motivating local stakeholders to commit to a shared vision' proved itself to be one of the main challenges for bidding cities, but cities that started developing a bidding plan significantly early in advance, were the ones that managed to overcome this the most effectively (Rampton et al., 2011, p. 25). Getz (2004) agrees that those who start the process early, tend to have better stakeholder relationships.

The most recurring obstacle for bids revealed itself to be balancing local and European dimensions, which not only relates to the programme having a strong sense of European character, but also to the capacity to reach further than its own city.

A number of publications have discussed case studies of bids in relation to a specific theme. Pafos' bid for 2017 has been discussed in relation to the use of public space to unite citizens (E. Dova, 2013). Karachalis and Deffner (2017) discussed the role city branding played in shaping the ECOC 2021 bids in Greece. The ECOC 2018 BrabantStad bid has been discussed by Richards and Marques (2016). Richards and Marques tried identify factors within the BrabantStad 2018 bid that lead to success, regardless of whether the city won the title. They emphasize the importance of authentic citizen involvement and social cohesion between local inhabitants, which stimulates the formation of social structures like networks, as well as stakeholder alignment. Although an interesting finding, this still only highlights a specific aspect of what bidding entails.

Some have written about the ECOC in terms of event management and strategy (Getz, 2004). Notably, there are, in comparison to other angles, rather large number of studies about identity politics, the balance between local and European identity and the creation of a European dimension in ECOC bids (Bee & Clarke, 2015; Fage-Butler, 2020; Gierat-Bieron, 2018; Immler & Sakkers, 2014; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Marinescu, 2021; Mittag, 2013; Sassatelli, 2002). These will be further discussed in chapter 3.1.

There is existing research that has tried to identify success factors of bidding processes for events of the size of ECOC. Not specifically related to ECOC, Getz (2004) identified five factors that lead to success: 'Have strong partners in the bid process. Make excellent presentations to the decision makers. Treat every bid as a unique process. Promote the track record of the community in hosting events. Assist other organizations to make better bids' (Getz, 2004, p. 15).

What becomes apparent when getting acquainted with the literature concerning the ECOC in initiative in general is that, due to the simple fact that every city builds on their unique social, cultural, economic and territorial foundation, most research is carried out through case studies. The many examples in the literature review confirm this point. This research is following the same road, limiting the scope to the three bidding cities to become ECOC in 2030 in Belgium. Furthermore, this literature review reveals that not only are there numerous fields of study interested in ECOC, but there are also many ways to go about conducting research. Some of the articles mentioned above were written after elite interviews, other through interviews with visitors. Some required policy analysis, others document analysis, discourse analysis, quantitative data analysis etc.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As discussed in the literature review, there is a lot of research about the ECOC initiative as a whole and what it contributes to cities. However, there is a considerably low amount of research focusing on the start of the process: in comparison to ex post studies, the bidding process and early stages of candidacy are left undertheorized. The strategic, political and normative mechanisms at play remain opaque. There are not a great deal of existing frameworks in regards to bidding processes, and especially ones that are not related to measuring results or success in hindsight. This thesis aims to counterfeit that, by unpacking the behind-the-scenes dynamics of ECOC bids.

The unique position of being able to study the bidding process through case studies at the time of the Belgian (pre)selection process is what ignited this research. However, the exact subject or angle was not easily found. Because of that research gap, which is the reason why this research is valuable and needed, there is no straightforward theoretical framework to base this research on. Yet, different conceptual perspectives have certainly been considered. The initial aim was to analyse how the cities balanced their local identities with European identity in their bids, mirroring research approaches of among others Clopot and Strani (2019) or Gierat-Bieron (2018). However, early engagement with the bid books quickly showed that most identity narratives echoed familiar themes already well-covered in literature and results might not be particularly revealing or innovative. Then, a turn was considered towards analysing the bids according to the criteria of the European Commission as discussed in chapter 2.2 above. However, this risked writing a thesis that resembled the expert panel report published by the European Commission after the preselection round.[1]

Furthermore, the interviews surfaced richer, more distinctive material on the behind-the-scenes processes: the strategic choices, stakeholder dynamics, and soft-governance dynamics that truly differentiate how Namur, Leuven, and Molenbeek craft their applications. Consequently, this study shifted its focus away from identity framing or the official criteria per se and toward the practical trade-offs, challenges, and pressures that underlie bid preparation. The aim is to identify the prevalent fields of

[1] This document can be freely consulted online: https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-12/ECOC-2030-belgium-pre-selection-report-v2.pdf#page=19.20.

tension that become pressure points for bidding teams, which is not discussed yet in academic literature. In doing so, the behind-the-scenes information specific to the Belgian bids for 2030 is transformed into a preliminary framework to further deepen the understanding of what it means to partake in the bidding process.

It is imperative to formulate some hypotheses in terms of the findings. The aforementioned and often researched aspect of local identity and the European dimension is still expected to come up, since it is at the heart of the ECOC initiative. Another hypothesis is that creating a network of stakeholders to support a project of this scale is also a challenge. Furthermore, I am interested in exploring the transparency of the process with the European Commission, and how the bidding teams experience and interpret the policy surrounding the initiative. Yet, whether their experiences are positive or negative remains up to the data of the interviews. These are expected results in terms of fields of tension, but the most important hypothesis is that other topics will be brought forward that beforehand would not be considered or that outsiders do not know about, and which are therefore valuable contributions.

This means that no existing framework has exclusively defined this research, but different conceptual lenses have guided this dissertation to create a new one. The aforementioned themes are thus relevant after all in combination with each other. The following subchapters clarify certain conceptual frameworks in relation to these hypotheses. Subchapter **Fout! Verwijzingsbron niet gevonden.** discusses how to define European identity in bids. 3.2 highlights some theories relating to stakeholder management. By discussing these three topics, different perspectives are provided which are combined in chapter 5 and 6 to create a new lens to look at the bidding process.

3.1. European Identity and Narrative Construction

An important academic perspective is that regarding identity and narrative construction, fundamental aspects of bid creating. Lähdesmäki clarifies that local, regional, national and European identities differ, and that all of these identities interact with policy on different levels, which she calls ‘identity politics’ (Lähdesmäki, 2014). She states that cities construct stories that align their local identity with European ideals.

> The ideological dimension is clearly expressed and internalized in the European Capital of Culture program. Through the program, art and culture are being considered as a unification factor in the rhetoric and ideology of the European Union. Thus, besides the locality, regionality and nationality, the European Capital of Culture program consciously and unconsciously produces and promotes 'Europeanness', and European identities. (Lähdesmäki, 2011)

Subsequently, the question is how to define European identity. Sassatelli (2002) offers a great review of European identity through three existing visions: 'unity,' 'diversity' and 'unity in diversity,' and then further fleshes these out through the examples of the 2000 ECOCs, among which Brussels. 'Unity' focuses on a shared European heritage, informed by Greek rationale, Roman law, and enlightenment values. However, it never became a concrete political strategy and exists more as an ideal than a reality. Moreover, it could be seen as Eurocentric and exclusionary, while overlooking Europe's dark sides of history. 'Diversity' offers a critical response to the perspective of 'unity,' stating there is no singular European culture. Europe should protect its diversity institutionally rather than seeking cultural unity. This view implies that European identity should be based on a social contract, and not shared cultural history. However, defining what counts as shared values remains hard. Therefore, 'unity in diversity' ultimately combines both perspectives, advocating for a European identity that integrates differences without erasing them. Sassatelli's model can be hard to define or pinpoint (Sassatelli, 2002).

These three perspectives have been used by other authors. Bee and Clarke argue that Liverpool aptly balanced local, national and European identities, displayed through 'unity in diversity' in their visual discourse, urban regeneration strategies, cultural events, and community engagement (Bee & Clarke, 2015).

Gierat-Bieron (2018) has discussed the Polish ECOC candidates of 2016 in regards to the 'europeanisation' of their bids. This 'europeanisation' is explored through three concepts: 'europeanness', the 'European dimension' and 'europeanisation'. The concepts offer complementary yet distinct lenses for understanding European identity and integration. 'Europeanness' emphasizes cultural and ethical values. The 'European

dimension' operationalizes these in policy (especially cultural), aims to foster 'unity in diversity' as highlighted the European Commission as one of the requirements. A strong European dimension should '(a) foster cooperation between cultural operators, artists and cities from the relevant Member States and other Member States in any cultural sector; (b) highlight the richness of cultural diversity in Europe; (c) bring the common aspects of European cultures to the fore' (Rampton et al., 2011). 'Europeanisation' focuses on institutional alignment, often sidelining cultural discourse (Gierat-Bieron, 2018).

Mittag argues that, although originally meant to promote a European identity, in recent years, the European dimension of the ECOC has lost importance because it has been transformed into a means for other ends. As previously discussed, it has become to a certain extent a tool for city advertising. However, he notes there is still a level of Europeanisation present (Mittag, 2013). The question however remains if all this is as true in real life. Research on audience perception considering the European dimension in the Aarhus 2017 events shows that audience members did not often experience 'European culture' during ECOC activities and that they were unsure what European culture would even be comprised of (Fage-Butler, 2020). Although the EU encourages conversations about Europeanness, they leave it to candidates to concretise this in practice (Patel, 2013).

In terms of the presence of a European dimension in an ECOC program, Immler and Sakkers (2014) argue that 'European dimension is most visible when the ECOC candidates reflect their own history as part of European history, particularly when hinting at their involvement with the major ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as national socialism, communism and colonialism' (p. 16). Clopot and Strani (2019) discuss Europeanness in the bids of Valletta, Plovdiv and Galway. They, too, researched how cities approach the relationship between local and European identity. Europeanness is in these cases created bottom-up. They conclude that 'cities find the notion as vague as the academic discourse has found it, and devise particular strategies to approach it by drawing on shared histories or shared (constructed) themes of relevance for several countries' (Clopot & Strani, 2019, p. 169). Their research shows that European identity is still hard to define, which leads to local narratives being foregrounded.

Marinescu aptly concludes that in general, there is a polarised approach to analysing ECOC projects. After a literature overview, he concludes that certain articles highlight the Europeanisation of ECOC, whereas others highlight local specificity. This depends from city to city, differing in accordance with the city's background (Marinescu, 2021). Sassatelli talks about 'eurocalisation' when describing how sometimes, there is an attempt to localise the European, while also europeanising the local (Sassatelli, 2013).

3.2. Stakeholder Management and Governance

Freeman (2010) broadly defines 'stakeholder' as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's purpose' (p. 53). He makes a differentiation between internal and external stakeholders. In the case of the ECOC bidding teams, internal stakeholders are the people actively working on the bids, whereas external stakeholders are among others the municipality, sponsors, cultural institutions, artists and the local inhabitants of the cities. Stakeholder management can be defined as 'the necessity for an organization to manage the relationships with its specific stakeholder groups in an action-oriented way' (Freeman, 2010, p. 53).

> The corporation's survival and continuing success depend upon the ability of its managers to create sufficient wealth, value, or satisfaction for those who belong to each stakeholder group, so that each group continues as a part of the corporation's stakeholder system. (Clarkson, 1995, p. 107)

As Clarkson states, the success of a project, in this case the bidding projects, relies on a strong understanding, cooperation and wellbeing of all stakeholders, highlighting the crucial importance of stakeholder management. During the ECOC bidding phase, there is a very high degree of stakeholder involvement, which makes bidding a strong bottom-up process. Although the EU's agenda is enforced by top-down policies, it is related to bottom-up processes involving cultural and social movements (Hristova, 2017). This is good, because strong involvement creates strong commitment from the different political and cultural stakeholders, which the bidding teams need to create a program, to further

deepen that in case they win the title over four years, before having to implement and realise their plans and program. However, previous research studying the case of Aarhus in 2017 has shown that strong involvement also creates high expectations within external stakeholders (Hansen & Laursen, 2015). A study of Umeå's 2014 bid showed that 'positive, growth-oriented discourse' was meant to encourage stakeholders to unite in a network of 'co-creation' (Åkerlund & Müller, 2012). However, this is not easily achieved. Besides unrealistic expectations, different issues in terms of stakeholder collaboration can come up with cultural projects, including: involvement in the collaboration, capacity to participate, power distribution among the convened stakeholders, a need for consensus-based decision making, heterogeneity in governance structures and value systems and the evolution of the roles of actors (Arnaboldi & Spiller, 2011). This ties into network theory, another important academic lens. Network theory views governance as a network that consists of stakeholders who are mutually dependent. Therefore, instead of focusing on hierarchical structures, there is a focus on collaboration and exchange. Subsequently, decision-making becomes more de-centralised and horizontal (Jones et al., 1997). Lastly, multi-level governance is an important term. This broad term refers to a complex system where supranational (European), national, regional and local governance interacts through overlapping and interdependent policy networks (Liu, 2021). Especially relevant to the ECOC program, multi-level governance shapes the bidding process, since teams must navigate power relations, interests, priorities and resources on a local, regional, national and European governance level at the same time. Multi-level governance requires extensive network building and excellent stakeholder engagement.

In summary, these are very broad, nuanced themes that bring to the surface complex issues, but they also offer a dynamic lens through which the processes of collaboration with bidding teams can be understood.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

This research is approached as a qualitative case study. Data has been collected through elite interviews, which means interviews with people who are in a privileged or influential professional position in regards to the subject researched (Huggins, 2014). The data is analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Herzog et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is a popular way of qualitative data analysis. It is particularly useful to analyse the way people experience, perceive and understand things, and is useful in this case because the research aims to surface main themes, 'fields of tension' (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

For this research, it is important to clearly and transparently spell out the ways of selecting a data sample, conducting interviews and analysing data, in order to heighten understanding, but also to invite both critique and similar research conduct.

Of particular relevance to justify the methodology of this research is the article by Hansen and Laursen (2015). They researched the management challenges that arise when transitioning from a bidding city to a designated ECOC. They found three general 'challenges' by abstracting them from interviews (combined with bid book analysis) with the team of Aarhus, ECOC in 2017. Furthermore, these interviews were semi-structured, conducted with broad and exploratory questions and not guided by any fixed research question. The interviews were thematically coded and grouped into themes, which was done inductively, meaning the coded data revealed overarching themes, instead of having delineated themes in advance based on existing literature or defined research questions. They relate this method to grounded theory in terms of creating a research question after letting the data speak for itself. The approach in this dissertation is akin to the one by Hansen and Laursen. However, they state that there is a lack of research on the early stages of the ECOC process, only to discuss the transition from bidding city to designated city. This thesis goes one step further, discussing the bidding process by itself while the bidding process is still running. Hansen and Laursen discuss one case study to create a theoretical framework, this dissertation uses three connected case studies. Their

framework reveals which managerial challenges arise, this dissertation reveals which behind-the-scenes fields of tension arise.

4.2. Data Sample

The selection of the data sample is fairly self-explanatory. In 2023, it was announced that Belgium would, for the fifth time, get to bring forth a European Capital of Culture. On 2 August 2024, a longlist was created of six cities competing for the title: Kortrijk, Bruges, Ghent, Kortrijk, Leuven, Molenbeek and Namur. Being born and raised in Kortrijk myself, I recognised a unique opportunity to conduct research about my hometown, using my personal network. On 2 September 2024, the six cities submitted their official candidacies in the form of bid books, followed by a presentation to an international expert panel on 21 October. Three days later, the preselection phase concluded when the panel announced a shortlist, consisting of Leuven, Molenbeek and Namur. From that moment, the three cities have one year to present a final candidacy during what is called the selection phase, which ends on 24 September 2025 with the announcement of the winning candidate. The data sample consists of Leuven, Namen, and Molenbeek, three cities that find themselves within the same national context, but with very different identities.

4.3. Data Sources/collection

The intent has always been to conduct interviews with the people that create the bids. I reached out to the mission holders of each city via email or LinkedIn. The mission holders seemed the best choice for this research, as they are the individuals that have created the project for their city creatively and developed it logistically, that have navigated the trajectory from day one and put together their teams. Leuven and Molenbeek each have two co-mission holders, Namur one. For each city, I got hold of one mission holder. Within the bidding time frame, this time was the most crucial for the selection phase, which is evidently why it is the perfect time to conduct this research in the first place. However, this means it took time and effort to schedule interviews.

Thus, the sample has been created through purposive sampling, where participants are chosen because of the qualities, experiences or knowledge they possess.

Furthermore, this is a case of homogenous purposive sampling, as the participants share similar traits, in this case jobs, and have been chosen for that specific purpose (Etikan, 2016).

Going forward, more participants were recruited through the snowball method. The ECOC bidding teams are still relatively small: 8 members in Molenbeek, 9 in Namur and 12 in Leuven. Therefore, it suffices to interview two people of each city. The mission holders each recommended one of their team members for further research. These team members were selected because they have functions that are vastly different from the mission holders, ensuring diversification for the responses to the interview questions.

To meet the official requirements of this study, a seventh participant was required. As the aim was to interview the same amount of people for each city, and conducting nine interviews would not be more beneficial than conducting six (this is not a study where the quantity of answers makes a difference), a participant outside of the three cities would be more interesting. The seventh interviewee, M.R., is the program curator and responsible for international relations of the team that is organising the ECOC event in Lublin in 2029, which means she has valuable experience in regards to the bidding process. Furthermore, she holds a Ph. D. and is an art historian, critic, curator and artist. M.R. has talked to the bidding candidates from Belgium and is currently gathering her observations and insights to support further dialogue on potential collaborative projects.

Leuven	L.B.	Co-mission holder
	E.G.	Project manager and team coach
Molenbeek	J.G.	Co-mission holder
	M.G.	Coordination and HR
Namur	L.L.	Mission holder
	T.L.	Project manager
Lublin	M.R.	Program curator Lublin 2029 and Ph. D. researcher

Table 2 *All interview participants and their functions, anonymised (personal creation)*

4.4. Interview Overview

4.4.1. Interview process

The research method is in-depth interviews. Given that this is a case study of projects that are ongoing, secondary data could not be used. The bid books from the preselection round offered great help to understand the content of the three projects, but could not offer insights into the topics that play up behind the scenes of a bidding team. A semi-structured questionnaire was used with the same open-ended questions for all (see appendix). The number of these questions was limited and they were as broad and openly interpretable as possible, serving the purpose of facilitating authentic and unique answers. Interviewees were asked about the key narratives that define their bids, their main challenges and opportunities encountered, the communication with the European Commission etc. This also means that there was an invitation for the interviewees to steer the conversation in different directions than expected beforehand. When this happened, the opportunities were used to ask the participants follow-up questions (Adams, 2015). In general, the aim was to bring up certain topics, and let the interviewee fill them in as they want. The interview guide was only something to hold on to, not all questions were as exhaustively covered in every interview. As the aim of the research is to bring forth unexpected results by letting the interviewees interpret themes such as 'challenges', one could say the interview method was inspired by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). However, this cannot be labelled as truthful grounded theory research, as grounded theory requires research to be conducted entirely inductively, whereas this research combines inductive and deductive approaches (Bryman, 2016).

Marta Ryczkowska did not receive the same questions as the other 6 interviewees. Her interview was the most leaning towards grounded theory, as there were no real questions prepared. She was asked about her experience with ECOC in relation to Lublin, and we shared our experiences talking to the Belgian bidding teams. From there on, she shared her thoughts on the ECOC initiative in general and gave valuable additional insights for this research.

The logistics of the interview process also ought to be mentioned. One of the interviews (with L.B.) was conducted in real life, the others all took place online through video calls. Every interview took between one hour and one hour and thirty minutes. All

audio was recorded and vizard.ai was used for transcription, with manual corrections where AI failed. Furthermore, the transcripts have remained as untouched as possible. The interviews with the Namur delegates were conducted in French, the interviews with the Leuven and Molenbeek delegates in Dutch. The interview with Marta Ryczkowska took place in English. All quotes in chapter 5 were translated to English for continuity purposes.

4.4.2. Ethics

Because the content of this research is private and contains sensitive information in regards to the bids while the competition is not over yet, is it important to be mindful of the data and privacy of the interviewees. All respondents were well informed from the outset about the research and their place within. An informed consent form was signed and can be found in the appendix. Consent was asked to record the interviews, to use the interviews as data for this thesis only, and to mention their names.

Furthermore, I want to point out that I am completely impartial, not tied to any of these cities or people, whom I all met for the first time while conducting this research. Therefore, there was no bias on the side of the researcher while collecting the data.

4.5. Data Analysis/Analysis Framework

As said, the analysis of the data is hybrid, done both inductively and deductively (Bryman, 2016). It is partially inductively, as the questions were as broad as possible, the conversation flowed according to the interviewee, and an analysis started mostly from their responses, truly letting respondents show which topics were prevalent during their experience of the bidding process. However, it is also partially deductively, as I did ask about European identity for example, the topic this research originally started from and which is based on existing literature (as discussed in the earlier chapters).

The thematic analysis was conducted according to Boyatzis (1998). This coding follows three steps. Firstly the data is analysed through open coding, secondly axial and thirdly selective. During the open coding process, for every though of the interviewee a code was created that remains as close to the core of their message as possible. That resulted in a list of 245 codes. Secondly, axial coding organises the codes in different categories of open codes that relate to each other. Even larger themes are abstracted so that there are key themes identified during the selective coding process. An example of the three levels of coding can be found in the appendix and coding trees of the axial and

selective coding can also be found in the appendix. The selective codes are: 'local identity and European vision', 'negotiating European Commission criteria', 'transparency and jury', 'inter-city dynamics', 'phase transition', 'governance and stakeholder dynamics', 'artistic integrity', 'the ECOC network and external expertise', and lastly 'mobilisation and uncertainty'. These codes are also the themes in which the findings are organised. Please note that 'negotiating European Commission criteria' and 'transparency and jury' have been combined into one category 'navigating the European Commission'.

5. FINDINGS

After conducting all the interviews, and while maintaining an inductive approach, it is clear that there is thematic resemblance between the cities on several levels. It becomes apparent that certain themes, concerns and challenges are universal. However, how they frame these, how they counteract these, or how they solve these, differs for the three cities. The findings are presented through the main themes that come up as influential to navigating the bidding process for Leuven, Molenbeek and Namur.

Griffiths (2006) has studied Cardiff, Bristol and Liverpool, three of six shortlisted cities for the 2008 ECOC title (bidding process in 2000). His research differs from this master's thesis because it was conducted years after the bidding process took place, and because he specifically researched the conceptions and discourses of culture in those cities. However, the way the findings in this thesis are presented, mirrors the way Griffiths presents his results. Themes are identified and serve as subchapters to structure the findings, in which a comparative analysis is written down with relevant quotes.

In this chapter, eight fields of tension are identified, eight themes that have caused tension for the bidding teams. They serve as subchapters within which evidence from each of the cases will be presented, and a cross-case synthesis will be made where relevant.

5.1. Local identity and European Narrative

First and foremost, there is a prevalent field of tension in terms of the identity of the cities portrayed in the bids, which was already expected to be a result of this research. How to marry local identity with a compelling European vision is at the heart of each city's narrative. By discussing this first, this subchapter also offers an accessible overview of the bids. All three bids overturn the usual perspective: instead of asking what Europe can do for their city, they ask themselves what their city has to offer Europe. This line of thought ensures that their local stories resonate on a continental level.

Namur adopted this mindset early on. L.L. recounts that her guiding question became 'what does Namur have to offer Europe?'. Through extensive consultation with the local population, Namur concluded that its identity is full of internal contradictions. There are wealthy and underprivileged neighbourhoods (a polarity underscored

geographically by the apparent division the train station creates between rich and poor), there is an urban centre juxtaposed with natural periphery, and there is historic patrimony and heritage while Namur also markets itself as a cutting-edge creative, digital city. The two rivers, the Meuse and the Sambre, physically separated the communities of Jambes and Namur, until recently a new footbridge reconnected them, allowing more residents to 'feel Namurois again' (L.L. from Namur). These divides made the bidding team realise Namur is made of 'diffluence', which mirrors a continental and global trend of fragmentation. Contrastingly, they crafted the unifying concept of 'confluence' for their bid, a word used to describe when two rivers come together and flow into one, as the Sambre and the Meuse do in the heart of Namur. Namur worked together with a delegation involved with Europe to anticipate Belgian and European priorities. The diffluence of streams symbolises 'withdrawal into oneself, the rise of extremism, and also a feeling of discomfort among individuals' in society (L.L. from Namur). Namur, like so many regions in Europe and the world at large, faces problems like individualism and loneliness through dealing with the aftermath of post-covid isolation, social polarisation etc. Therefore, one of their focus themes is mental health. Because Namur is relatively small, their aim is to bring people together across social, geographical and cultural divides. T.L. from Namur adds to that, explaining that they realised throughout the bidding that the ECOC initiative is not just about culture, but about connecting enterprises, uniting the territory, creating mobilisation and improving the social dimension. L.L. states that in the first bid, they tried to have a response to every objective of the European Commission. During the second round, they are making choices. Although winning by ticking all European Commission boxes would be great, the Namur bid always starts from the question 'how does it serve our long-term strategy?' By highlighting how a small city can heal its own rifts, Namur positions itself as a microcosm of Europe, addressing broader European challenges.

Molenbeek's narrative also starts from a distinct local reality and upscales it by projecting it as a European value. As J.G. recalls, they too asked: 'What does Europe need that Molenbeek can provide?' The answer and core of the project is '*sadaka*', a term in Arabic, Swahili and other languages that encompasses generosity and solidarity, giving without expecting anything in return. Molenbeek, finding itself separated from the Brussels city centre by a canal, is one of the most diverse places in Belgium with over 140

nationalities in less than 100.000 inhabitants. Despite Molenbeek receiving mostly negative media attention over the past few years, being linked to criminality, poverty, violence and drugs, *sadaka* is what defines Molenbeek and keeps the community together, according to the bidding team. The motivation to become ECOC comes from the Brussels-Capital Region, when they needed a cultural gesture to emerge after terrorist attacks and polarisation were on the rise in the capital. M.G. from Molenbeek is convinced that diversity is a strength, and not a weakness. Different communities help each other survive hardships every day in Molenbeek, which J.G. argues is exactly what Europe needs right now, as it lacks generosity, solidarity and social justice.

> The themes we wanted to highlight, the urgent issues of Brussels we aimed to focus on, the people in Brussels we sought to bring to the fore… All these turned out to be deeply connected with the other side of the canal, specifically with Molenbeek: a very young community, a highly diverse municipality, a municipality of great social fragility, but also considerable social mobility. (J.G. from Molenbeek)

Furthermore, J.G. ties this central theme to very tangible sub-themes that emerge from an extensive grass-roots exercise with 1000 young Brussels residents. They brought forth four priority themes: equality and social justice, superdiversity and multilingualism, a greener and bluer city, and safe and brave spaces. These themes form the backbone of the bid, each inherently linked to *sadaka* and each connecting local issues to pan-European ones. Molenbeek's bid asserts a new European narrative where marginalised communities become a beacon of the values Europe supports. The often stigmatised local identity of Molenbeek is transformed through a very bold reframing.

Leuven's team initially faced an entirely different kind of identity-related challenge in terms of their narrative. Unlike Namur and Molenbeek, Leuven is not a city of apparent needs or divides at the surface, but a prosperous, rich university city. L.B. admits there was some timid hesitation at first when defending why Leuven deserved to be ECOC. On first sight, Leuven does not fit in the trend of recent years to award the ECOC title to cities that need it to create much needed change. Aware that Leuven might appear

the least needy of the title, the team carefully considered how to justify their bid in terms of added European value. They looked at Europe's challenges and asked how Leuven's strengths could address these. L.B. notes that the world today (and Europe) faces existential issues such as war, the climate crisis and polarisation, and that ECOCs have a more important role than ever in fostering social cohesion. Leuven positions itself as a hub of knowledge and humanism that can serve as a laboratory for tackling these issues. 'We are, to some extent, an epicentre in Europe. A laboratory for Europe. Humanism partly originated in Leuven. What does that have to do with us today?', L.B. asks rhetorically. Their chosen theme, 'Human Nature', bridges society and the environment in its broadest of interpretations. Leuven asserts that it can use its rich intellectual and social capital to pioneer solutions for both social fractures and environmental crises (tackling both 'human' and 'nature' as their theme implies), not shying away from complex issues like polarisation or climate change. The European vision comes into play here as Leuven is a 'climate mission city' (one the EU's 112 climate mission cities, striving to deliver 100 climate neutral cities by 2030)[2], and raised the question why it shouldn't also be a European cultural mission city. In practice, that means using Leuven's resources for Europe's benefit rather than Leuven's own personal gain: 'Does Leuven need to win this for its own sake? No,' L.B. emphasizes. 'We need to make a difference there for Belgium and for Europe. We have all the resources to do that, so that is our strength.' Furthermore, L.B. underscores that one of their focus topics is the redistribution of power. This makes a connection to the European dimension through themes such as diversity, sustainability and inclusion, and digitalisation. E.G. from Leuven explains that thinking of how to combine each of these European priorities with 'human' and 'nature' pushed them to make new radical connections between Leuven's themes and Europe's priorities. Going from a self-contained, successful city to contributing to the bigger picture shows a deliberate shift in the city's self-positioning. This is further highlighted through L.B.'s acknowledgement that if Leuven wins, they have an obligation to extend the project to places like Molenbeek.

[2] This is also the reason why Leuven's organisation is called Lov2030 instead of Leuven2030, which would have been in line with Namur2030 and MB2030 (the B standing for Brussels): Leuven2030 was already taken by the city's existing climate mission city project.

5.2. Navigating the European Commission

One of the most surprising findings is the stances of the interviewees in regards to their interaction with the European Commission. All interviewees were open and felt comfortable enough to discuss, question, and in some cases critique, the status quo of the relationship bidding cities have with the European Commission. The interviews pointed out that direct or indirect interaction between the parties is mostly structured around two main components. Firstly, the European Commission has their six criteria as discussed in chapter 2.2. These criteria are the main guidelines for the bidding cities, especially since they are required to structure their bid books through six chapters in accordance with these six criteria. Secondly, there are the more direct exchanges between bidding teams and the jury, for example through the feedback the cities received in the expert panel report after the preselection round.

5.2.1. Negotiating European Commission Criteria

The six criteria from the European Commission provide a universal structure through which bids can be evaluated. However, this framework creates an interesting tension for the bidding teams between compliance and creative freedom. Interestingly, despite all following the six formal criteria, each team interprets and navigates them differently.

Molenbeek sees the criteria as broad and open to interpretation. The team has looked into the criteria very seriously, and has concluded that they are not too strict, but that they are generally far too strictly interpreted.

> I think you can go many ways with those criteria (...) We have examined them very thoroughly and actually continue to do so every day. What I observe is not so much that these criteria are rigid or closed off, but rather that over the years or decades, a kind of conventional interpretation has emerged that everyone adheres to. So my issue isn't really with the criteria themselves, but with the cautious way they are consistently interpreted and applied. (J.G. from Molenbeek)

Rather than to challenge the criteria outright, Molenbeek's approach is to push the boundaries of interpretation, allowing themselves freedom from within. M.G., too, states that the limitations are a good thing, because they help to show that the criteria are flexibly interpretable. This free interpretation manifested itself for example in their choice to build a bid that is much more thematic than territorial. They did not start from local tourist highlights nor invest in infrastructure. Instead, their most valuable asset is an idea, a state of mind (*sadaka*). Furthermore, M.G. openly remarks that not the criteria of the bid books are limiting, but the number of pages is.

The **Leuven** team manages to align their city's vision with the EU criteria quite well. To a certain extent, they argue that the criteria are a good thing, because they force the team to not only focus on their strengths, but also work on their weaknesses. The European dimension for example is a criterium they struggle with, and this being one out of only six criteria forces them to make that large piece of the puzzle fit. Whereas Molenbeek argues that 'everything can be squeezed into the frame of the six criteria', adopting a true 'where there is a will, there is a way' mentality (M.G. from Molenbeek), Leuven has experienced difficulties in fitting certain parts of their candidacy within the borders of the criteria.

> We are currently dealing with something we really want to include, but which does not fit neatly into one of the chapters (...) We strongly want to work with a certain methodology, a lab-based approach. We aim to be a laboratory around five different themes, including digital, and inclusion and diversity, which naturally aligns with our narrative. This process-based work, you could fit that into outreach, but that doesn't fully work, since outreach already includes target groups, or requires describing how you'll work inclusively. And in the artistic program, some really just expect the list of events. (E.G. from Leuven)

Leuven's idea to create laboratories that bring together local partners to find new solutions to problems, to foster exchange and collaboration, is really meant to create a

meaningful impact for the city, but also for Europe as an example approach other cities can adopt. However, impact ambitions are not really asked about in the criteria chapters of the bid, which makes Leuven feel limited in their possibilities.

As for **Namur**, they view the criteria in ways similar to both Molenbeek and Leuven. On the one hand, they interpret the criteria flexibly and apply them to fit their own agenda, since Namur's entire bid is based on a long-term cultural strategy that has started in 2012.

> What nourishes me and guides my decisions is both anticipating Europe's priorities and seeing what makes sense in relation to the priorities of the city and the territory. And that's always how, if I have to make a decision, I decide by telling myself that it must be as useful as possible for the city's long-term strategy. (L.L. from Namur)

On the other hand, still, Namur also experiences the criteria's limitations. They state that the bid book regulations have barely changed over the past years, and that certain topics do not have a place in the bid books, although they deserve to. The place of the artist in society, environmental impact and international cooperation are important elements of creating an ECOC strategy, but are not asked about and do not fit within the criteria. Moreover, L.L. from Namur raises the important question of the risk of homogenisation among bids, and whether that could be avoided by ruling out the standardised criteria and formatting. Furthermore, she brings up the rise of AI, and wonders how originality is going to prevail in the future and how the European Commission is weaponing itself against this innovation.

5.2.2. Transparency and Jury

Besides the official criteria for the bid books, there are more direct exchanges between the candidate cities and the European Commission. Most importantly, the candidate cities are evaluated by an independent jury in both the preselection and the selection rounds. This jury represents the European Commission. All interviewees brought up their views on the jury, the communication with them and the transparency of the process.

Most importantly, there is the expert panel report, a document published publicly that gives feedback on all of the bid books of the preselection round. Bid books are

accompanied by oral presentations for the jury as well. All three cities commend the ECOC initiative and the jury for its transparency. For example, when a city contacts the jury with a question, the response will at all times be directed to and reach all three cities. Furthermore, none of the cities feel like communication is ever unclear. Feedback is always perceived to be concise and goal-oriented.

However, the **Namur** team explains that they do not always agree with the feedback they have received from the jury. L.L. points out that they are confident that the content of their bids is sound. Therefore, when they do not agree with feedback, they approach the feedback differently, more than once concluding that this feedback highlights the importance of the correct wording in bid books. Perhaps, rather than the content, the way they write about the content has mislead the jury and needs refining or rephrasing. Additionally, this highlights the importance of the oral defence, where cities can elaborate and go into conversation about the content of their bid, to convince the jury that their bid does in fact respond to the jury expectations and previous feedback, because T.L. from Namur believes that the team that responds best to the jury expectations wins the title.

The **Molenbeek** team adds to this, stating that in their experience, the jury is subjective. M.G. explains that her impression is they are not the jury's favourite. The question is of course if the jury has given her that impression rightly so, which would make them less neutral and impartial than they should be, or if that is just because M.G. is convinced that Molenbeek has the lowest chance of succeeding because of its socio-political background. J.G. adds to that by explaining that his concerns in terms of the 'cautious and safe' interpretation of what a bid should be in recent years (as discussed in chapter 5.2.1) are partially caused by the criteria limitations, but just as much by the constellation of the jury and the fact that the jury panel only consists of only eleven people who clearly have personal tastes and preferences. Furthermore, J.G. and M.G. both share Namur's experience that there is a need for extremely 'high readability' for the bid books.

The **Leuven** team is less critical of the jury and their feedback, explaining that their first bid book received even more positive feedback than expected, especially in terms of the European dimension, of which they were under the impression needed a lot more work.

5.3. Inter-city dynamics

A peculiar recurring theme throughout the coded data from this research is how the different bidding teams interact with and perceive each other. All three express respect towards each other's efforts and solidarity in all directions. Moreover, although they recognise that each finalist represents a different facet of Belgium and Europe, comparisons inevitably arise. The six interviewees balance competition and collegiality in ways that reveal their emotional connection to their own bids.

Leuven and Namur explicitly talked about the other cities, stating each city is worthy of the win. This suggests a collegial atmosphere. The teams insist that the others have strong bids. There is a mutual respect, a sense of camaraderie because all three are bringing together people through culture. Further evidence is found in the conversations about cooperation in the long run. E.G. from Leuven states there is a greater legacy to be built through collaboration, a sentiment echoed by L.B. from Leuven, who hints at conversations about future collaborations with the other cities in case Leuven would win. This indicates that perhaps the realisation of the content of the bids is not in all cases mutually exclusive. Leuven is already creating collaborations with Ghent, Bruges and Kortrijk, the three eliminated cities from the preselection phase.

Yet, there is also a level of benchmarking present within all cities. All three cities state they attentively observe each other's results. Not only are there many conversations between them, but after the preselection, they had the chance to see each other's bid books too. According to L.L. from Namur, the Namur team analysed the jury report of the other cities closely. T.L. from Namur said they capitalise on the work of the other cities and learn from each other indirectly, and L.L. even states that they feel the drive to actively differentiate their own project from the other cities'. There is a great likeness in each of their projects, so they offer an easy reference point to compare your own project with. M.G. from Molenbeek approaches it differently, stating that rather than seeking differentiation, Molenbeek looks at Namur and Leuven's strengths, making sure those are not their own weaknesses. In contrast, E.G. from Leuven mentioned they shared their bid books earlier than the others in the preselection phase and they found reading the others a helpful exercise. However, they tried not to focus too much on comparing their bids, and to retain focus on their own bid instead.

One prominent theme is how each city strategically differentiates itself from the others. All three cities are of similar size and in close geographic proximity, with bids with overlapping values and shared stories, and yet each has carved out a unique identity and rationale to legitimise its candidacy.

Molenbeek's team portray themselves as the underdog. Throughout the interview, they emphasise two characteristics. Firstly, their unique approach, which manifests itself in the freedom they dared to give themselves when approaching the bid criteria, and in more operational aspects, such as their unusual approach of the build-up of the ECOC year 2030 in case they would win. Secondly, they portray a sense of urgency, which sets them apart from Leuven and Namur. As a municipality that is often stigmatised in the media, Molenbeek frames its bid as a singular chance to transform their image. M.G. from Molenbeek very openly states that their team has the best bid, yet the smallest chance of winning.

> We definitely have the best project, but we're also definitely the most fragile. (...) I think the jury will choose Leuven. (...) Because they have to imagine sending European tourists to Molenbeek in a few years. But just look at the newspaper headlines about Brussels and Molenbeek in recent months. There's not much positive there anymore. If they choose Leuven, it's because, frankly... it's not a brave choice. It's simply a good choice. A safe choice, yes. Then you're choosing reliability. Something solid. And that's fine. Choosing reliability is always good. Many people choose reliability. (M.G. from Leuven)

With similar sentiment, L.B. from Leuven restates she would be very happy for all three cities, but thinks Namur is the least logical winner, since the last Belgian ECOC (Mons 2015) was already Wallonian. Namur on the other hand, claims in this regard they have more right to the title, as Wallonia has only brought forth one Belgian ECOC over the years, and Flanders two. This is interesting, because that makes the debate a territorial and political one: Leuven is Flemish, Molenbeek is part of the Brussels-Capital Region, and

Namur is Wallonian, each part of different regions and political structures within Belgium, a country that already suffers under great tension because of these divides.

The competitive spirit is palpable within all interviews. Remarkably, L.B. from Leuven revealed that after Namur, Leuven and Molenbeek were preselected, there were conversations about uniting forces. The three bids were initially led by women and in feminist spirit, they discussed how close the cities were geographically, and that with each city approaching their candidacy as a bid for the region rather than the cities, their regions even touch each other's borders. However, in that case, still, one city needed to be brought forward. Without consensus, the process continued to be a competition. However, the competitive spirit of the project remains questioned at times: T.L. from Namur asks himself too if competition is the right formula for the ECOC initiative, stating that the initiative should uplift cities all together and should foster collaboration and co-operation.

5.4. Phase Transition

The transition period between the preselection, the phase defined by the first bid book, and the selection based on the second bid book (which the three cities are developing at present time of writing) is a demanding period that requires the teams to reflect on and refine their respective proposals. All three cities have received feedback on their first bid book from the jury through the expert panel report that was made publicly available, and use this to change or elaborate their bids in round two. A prevalent challenge for all three is translating the ambitious ideas and bold aspirations of their first bid book into detailed plans.

L.B. from **Leuven** recalls the jump from the first to the second round as a big leap. The expert panel made it clear that their adequate first bid book needed elaborating on different levels. E.G. states that the day after the preselection, a call for a bigger team was sent out into the world, as they anticipated a big increase in work and challenges. For Leuven, it was very clear which areas required attention: the mobilisation of the student community in Leuven appeared a challenge, the artistic program needed developing and their audience needed to be diversified. Furthermore, L.B. states that in the second phase, they are creating 'laboratories', thinktanks or focus groups created with big

institutions and different city actors to explore how to approach big topics such as decolonisation. In general, every aspect of their bid is enhanced in the second phase: projects are added or scaled up, more innovative elements are introduced, and weak spots are addressed. The narrative does not change, but the scale and depth do. The Leuven team has, besides the content of the bid, identified other challenges in this phase. Firstly, being specific in the second bid book is a challenge, e.g. artistic planning is expected to be discussed down to budgeting, venues and exact planning, even though these plans are only for 2030. Secondly, a great challenge according to E.G. is knowing what is needed now, and what can be moved forward and developed in the future, because winning means entering yet another stage of the project with new time frames and objectives.

Molenbeek's phase transition is very similar to that of Leuven. They too realise that the main challenge is to bring the abstract into the concrete. In the first bid book, you have to 'sell the dream' whereas in the second, you have to 'show that you can actually make it happen' (M.G. from Molenbeek). Akin to Leuven, the Molenbeek team feels there is never enough time and there are so many things to refine and revise. Thus, J.G. has learned to only focus on what is relevant for the second bid book to come. All other topics are either for later or they have to go. M.G. from Molenbeek also explains that the feedback of the expert panel report not only shows them what plans need to be changed, but also which things just need better explaining. They realized that the first bid book did not always get the point across the right way. Related to that and to the concerns of the Leuven team, J.G. quite openly critiques the second bidding phase, stating the level of clarity and readability the jury asks of them in bid book 2 is far too high. Creating a detailed artistic program and writing a bid book that reads like a program booklet is impossible work. In general, they had to refine their narrative to be jury-proof without dulling its edge.

Namur's team explains how they will keep their narrative of confluence, but apply it in different ways than in their first bid book, shifting focus slightly. They appear to be the only team making significant changes in terms of the form in which they represent their narrative. Their first bid book organised programming by three thematic pillars (of 'care', 'connection' and 'living') which they have changed to frame the program around explicit 'confluences' such as local-global, in order to tie every aspect of the program back to their core concept. Furthermore, Namur echoes and elaborates on the sentiments of the

other teams. They too recognise that the important difference between the preselection and the selection is specificity and concretising everything. T.L. from Namur states their second bid is stronger conceptually, but also more mature and especially has stronger partnerships. However, they also elaborate on the limitations of the second phase. Firstly, thinking in terms of budgets severely limited their options.

> Then, in the second bid book, we really experience it [being limited financially]. That's where we had to put numbers down. It's really in the second dossier that this notion of attaching figures to the artistic projects comes in. And indeed, every time you attach a sum of money -well, that's true for our private lives too- it closes certain doors because you have to be realistic. (T.L. from Namur)

Secondly, both interviewees of Namur indicate that there is way more material to present than what they can fit within the page limits of the second bid book. In the first bid book, they tried to have a response for every criterium and every theme of the European Commission. In bid book 2, they deliberately made trade-offs and decided to commit to certain focus topics. Therefore, they had to make selections of what to include in the bid book, which lead to great discussions with their expert advisors (see chapter 5.8).

5.5. Stakeholder Management and Governance

A clear source of tension for all bidding cities is navigating governance and stakeholder dynamics throughout the process. Specifically, the relationships with big institutions and with political actors has proven to be a challenge for each of the cities, although this translates to context-specific problems for each of the cases.

As stated earlier, the motivation for **Molenbeek**'s candidacy stems from the Brussels-Capital Region. However, Brussels is a 'big bureaucratic mess', to use the words of Molenbeek's first bid book. As M.G. states, the political climate in Brussels is extremely hard to navigate. She explains that cooperating with the municipality of Molenbeek and different stakeholders has been a big challenge. In her experience, these actors are not eager to welcome new cultural entities such as the ECOC team, as if somehow that would

‘change their own position on the social or cultural map’ (M.G. from Molenbeek). In terms of governance, the Molenbeek team is dealing with a web of institutions: Brussels regional cultural bodies, community specific institutions (e.g. the Flemish VGC and the French COCOF for culture in Brussels) etc. The bid team has to act as a central mediator among these. There is no overarching cultural strategy, and many levels of governance to take into consideration. From texts from all these different governance structures, the ECOC team has created a new text, an overarching cultural strategy for Molenbeek and Brussels at large. Impressively, the ECOC initiative has become a lever for true change in the cultural governance of the city.

> And where I think we’re gradually succeeding is in bringing together cultural and political actors, who too often don’t talk to or work with each other, behind one big narrative. And in doing so, creating forms of coherence, collaboration, and common purpose that are too often lacking in fragmented Brussels. It’s a slow process, but we’re now starting to see the results. And so this integrated, coordinated cultural strategy, developed from Molenbeek but also applicable to Brussels as a whole, will be voted on by the Molenbeek municipal council in May. (J.G. from Molenbeek)

Furthermore, J.G. from Molenbeek explains that they did not hesitate to involve non-EU stakeholders, which distinguishes them from the other two cities.

> Also in terms of partnerships, it was obvious to us that partners from outside the EU should be involved, because Europe is much more an idea than a map. And so cultural creators and citizens who don’t live in Europe today must also be able to take part, as they are just as much a part of that idea of Europe. (J.G. from Molenbeek)

In **Leuven**, the bid received full support from the city from the beginning. Furthermore, Leuven’s bid is very focused on collaboration with the region. L.B. proudly states they have

managed to bridge local political tension and convince all municipalities in the region to support their agenda, even though they are all part of different political parties. Furthermore, Leuven's main goal is to create long-lasting partnerships with major institutions, specifically the KU Leuven, the biggest university in the city. They created a task force to work on a shared cultural space with the KU Leuven, who they hope will take the lead in certain elements of their project, such as the laboratories discussed in chapter 5.4. On the other hand, L.B. says the collaborations with institutions are a two-way street: the Africa Museum for example has expressed their desire to address their problematic, colonial history (which has been the topic of several public debates around decolonialisation in Belgium) and use the ECOC partnership to open up conversations and change rigid systems. Concluding, even though Leuven receives support from different partners, they reaffirm that stakeholder management remains an important part to balance, especially because of the size of the ECOC initiative, and the speed at which the team is forced to move.

> The relationship with the city (…) is a bit of a juggling act too. How much trust do they give us? How much control do they want to have at times? (…) You have to be accountable to anyone, and especially to those who fund you. So in a way, that's normal, but there are degrees, and you also need to be given trust. And of course, that's something you have to work on. And each time it's like, oh, I thought it was fine, but okay, let's sit down together again. But that's okay. Along the way we've found a good *modus vivendi*. (E.G. from Leuven)

In the case of **Namur**, a defining feature of their governance approach is that on the one hand, they entered the competition later than the other cities, emphasising that they had less time to prepare, but on the other hand, they rely on a long-term, existing cultural strategy which started in 2012 and already focused on forging relationships between cultural operators. This provides a great network for Namur to work with, but also introduces complexities in terms of governance. Aligning the established strategic plan with the accelerated and quite dynamic requirements of the ECOC process demanded

flexibility, which was sometimes difficult to achieve. Furthermore, L.L. from Namur describes running the ECOC project as a 'triangle of teamwork at the highest level' of political, societal and artistic synergy. This is so far removed from traditional governance of the cities that are the stakeholders of this bid, which can be challenging but also a valuable learning experience for all. It is hard for these stakeholders, who often times also have the financial funding in hands, to hand over artistic control. Furthermore, L.L. and T.L. from Namur add that the speed at which the ECOC project is run, is in stark contrast to the working speed of political actors involved, stating that there are often stakeholder disagreements, but because of the time limitations there is simply no other solution but to move forward and focus on what connects the stakeholders. Moreover, L.L. states that, had there been more time, she would have liked to involve the different city services, bringing in all layers of the city and region, since accelerating administrative changes would accelerate changes for the better in the long-term legacy of the project.

5.6. Balancing mobilisation and uncertainty

Tying into stakeholder management, mobilisation refers to how the teams rally support from citizens and partners and how they keep the momentum going. All three cities explain that mobilisation is a challenge. Leuven, which is largely inhabited by students, deals with the added challenge of mobilising students who usually only reside in Leuven for a few years. Additionally, E.G. from Leuven mentions that in order to mobilise all citizens, the narrative of their bids needs to be written down in a way that is understandable for all, which poses an additional difficulty. Molenbeek feels challenged mobilising its cultural partners, as there is currently no cultural strategy at place. Namur has also cited mobilisation as a challenge. Specifically, uniting the region has been hard, as well as creating visibility with all citizens while being constrained by budget limitations. However, L.L. also testifies that mobilisation is one of the things she is most proud of at the same time: aided by the ECOC programme, the collective and cooperative spirit in Namur is present where usually individuality would triumph. She has witnessed collaborations spring between people who have never even been in the same room together.

Mobilisation is a major element of the bidding phase, and yet all three cities have to face the possibility of defeat and have to cope with that while motivating other and planning legacy. Whereas subchapter 5.5 discusses stakeholder management in itself as a field of tension, this subchapter highlights another aspect of it. All three cities reveal there is a dual challenge: energising a whole city/region and simultaneously planning for the possibility of losing.

In case they do not win, the cities are, in general, positive that their bid has created an impact, albeit in different ways. In Namur, the ECOC is described as a 'springboard' and an 'accelerator' for the cultural strategy of the city and, importantly, the region. It has brought people together, fostered new conversations and brought forth new ideas. In Leuven, they are convinced of the impact of their bid too. They have elevated the 'cultural compass' from the municipality and hope with their Lov EU Academy and their 'laboratories' to instigate conversations and articulate new visions for Leuven that will create long-lasting impact. For Leuven, the ECOC bid is a 'lever' that has created collective strength, which is a legacy they want to keep alive no matter the outcome of the competition. J.G. indicates that one successful outcome already is getting cultural and political actors to collaborate who normally wouldn't. The bidding process has been a 'lever' for cultural governance, and that coalition-building is a win in itself, akin to what L.L. observed in Namur. However, J.G. is realistic that if Molenbeek loses, maintaining that coalition will be hard without a common goal binding them. J.G.'s comments convey more scepticism about continuity and legacy. This is further reinforced by the uncertain political climate in Brussels, which makes J.G. almost certain that in case they do not win, most elements of their plan B will fall through eventually.

> Our bid is incredibly urgent, because whether it's in terms of cultural programming, cultural policy, or other interventions, we can genuinely say: 'If we don't get the title, a lot of what's in this bid book simply won't happen.' Our bid isn't the cherry on the cake, it's the recipe for the cake itself. And I think with these ECOCs, we need to return to that sense of urgency and necessity. Awarding the title to cities where everything is already in place, where 80% of what's in the bid book will

> happen anyway, title or not... I think we're living in times where that's becoming harder to justify. (J.G. from Molenbeek)

Lastly, the interviews with Leuven point out that they are the most adamant on expanding their legacy building through cultural collaboration and exchange with the other cities, regardless of who wins the title. More so, they underscore the fact that Belgium is a small country with great public transportation. It would benefit all cities to present more of a united front, in order to carry the increase of tourism during the ECOC year together.

5.7. Artistic integrity

Safeguarding the artistic integrity of their project should be one of the essential goals of ECOC cities. This subchapter discusses whether the cultural content of the bids is guided by artistic vision, rather than being completely instrumentalised for the social and political objectives of the program. Cities have to balance culture as an artistic good and using culture as a means to an end. In general, the cities did not focus on this too much, but while analysing the data, some interesting quotes regarding this field of tension came up.

Interestingly, two out of the three initial co-missionholders in Leuven are artists (one is a theatre maker, the other a slam poetry artist, although she has since left the project), meaning the bid was co-authored by practicing artists. However, E.G. from Leuven explains that the city still has to evolve to support artists. The ECOC candidacy stimulates that.

> In Leuven, there is a lot of talent, but we do see that at a certain point, they end up flying off to the big cities. And that's actually painful to witness, that you can't retain them, or that while you do have a fertile ground for young talent, once they grow, there just aren't that many opportunities here. I'm not the one making policy decisions, so I don't know what the root cause is. But I do think that a European Capital of Culture title could contribute to what we call capacity building to help

> build a stronger network. Not just with Leuven on its own, but by also involving the wider region, to see if we can work on and develop that ecosystem. So that we can allow artists to work and produce within our region, and so they don't end up leaving the city. (E.G. from Leuven)

Subsequently, one of their laboratories is dedicated to developing an artistic network, to foster exchange and engagement between artists and the big cultural players in the city.

All factors of a bid play into each other: the region can help support artists, and the main topics Leuven wants to tackle, polarisation and climate change, need to be tackled inclusively, and (besides mobilising the city inhabitants) actors like artists can play key roles in that process according to E.G. from Leuven.

J.G. from **Molenbeek** has a very clear stance regarding this topic. He claims that the role of the artist is very little defined and valued within the ECOC framework. There is so much thinking in terms of target audiences, but sometimes in a 'rather paternalistic and even stigmatising' way for the artist. J.G. himself has experienced that it is hard to ensure that the artistic component of a story of the size of ECOC is not instrumentalised or buried. The decentralisation of the artistic dimension is in J.G.'s eyes one of the reasons there have been so many 'safe' ECOCs in recent years.

> There are indeed many bids that have evolved into forms of city marketing, with very conventional, mainstream cultural programs. I absolutely believe that while it shouldn't be narrowly artistic and that you need to define culture broadly within such a bid, the artistic must still be a crucial driving force. And within the framework you're given, and also when you see who all gets involved, that's not easy. (J.G. from Leuven)

L.L. from **Namur** has mentioned the place of the artist as one of the topics that should have a place within the framework of ECOC criteria (see chapter 5.2.1). However, neither

L.L. nor T.L. of Namur elaborate in the interviews on Namur's approach to solidify the place of the artist or an artistic network within their bid.

5.8. The Business of the ECOC Network

One of the topics that came up naturally with every interviewee is the existence of an ECOC network. There are many professionals who have done the bidding process before for other cities, and who offer their experience and advice to current bidding cities as consultants. Leuven, Namur and Molenbeek all agree that the involvement of these 'experts', as they are referred to, is useful and recommended. However, all of the participants experienced downsides to the inclusion of experts.

More than 70 cities have been ECOC since the programme's inception. Therefore, there are a large number of people who have valuable experience and guidance to offer to first-time bidding candidates. Almost all interviewees expressed their surprise about the vastness of the network consisting of all these past ECOC professionals. E.G. from Leuven commends organisations like Culture Next for how they facilitate exchange with consultants. All interviewees agree that using expert consultancy can be useful for different reasons: they help select material for the bid books, since there is much more material than the 60-page and 100-page limit allow (T.L. from Namur); they know the jury or have dealt with the jury, who are subjective and therefore hard to assess (L.L. from Namur); because there are countless possibilities to approach the competition and not enough time to consider all of them as an inexperienced bidmaker (M.G. from Molenbeek); or simply because they can provide outsider perspectives concerning your specific case combined with insider knowledge about the ECOC process (E.G. from Leuven).

However, there are also different levels of critique and reluctance towards using these expert consultants. First of all, there is the impression that there is a lot of pride involved for some experts in regard to the amount of cities they have (successfully) accompanied in their process, insinuating this brings a certain type of motivation to win to the table that does not fit what the team stands for (L.B. from Leuven). Furthermore, L.B. mentions that these experts are expensive, and that on the other hand, the team is dealing with artists who feel underpaid and underrepresented. This creates a tension that

is hard to justify. Her colleague E.G. explains that expert advice is useful, but that one has to be mindful that they fit into your project, share your values, and are able to contribute to your specific vision.

> There are also consultants who stay entirely within that world. And sometimes that can be questionable. Because it has to fit. There really needs to be a genuine match. They have to be able to truly contribute to the Leuven trajectory, not the other way around. I've heard of cultural capitals where, as soon as they get the title, things are suddenly taken over internally (…) We hear strange stories about that too, that it doesn't end well, so we're definitely aware of that. (E.G. from Leuven)

This sentiment is echoed by Namur and Leuven's teams. Yet, Namur mentions that working with the artistic director who worked on Mons 2015 saved them a lot of time. They needed extra help because they started preparing their candidacy late. However, they also warn for the danger of homogenisation, which J.G. also mentions as a major drawback of hiring experts for Molenbeek.

> I really hadn't realized that there's a sort of ECOC business, with consultants and experts who accompany all the bids. Again, that is not really the road I want to go down. I didn't bring on board every possible expert, because I think that can also lead to a kind of homogenization (…) That's how you end up creating things that could be found in any city in the world, and for me, that's not what a European Capital of Culture should be. On the other hand, once you've been chosen and awarded the title, working with and tapping into all these existing networks (…), for the international development of cities, I think that has enormous potential. But yes, I'm quite struck by the fact that so many cities work with the same experts. (L.L. from Namur)

I find it somewhat bewildering how a kind of bubble has formed of people who all know each other, who are only concerned with these ECOCs, and who have formed many unspoken and unwritten ideas about what something like that is supposed to be. And in fact, there is very little that says it has to be that way. (J.G. from Leuven)

6. Discussion

This chapter offers an overview of the findings, reframed to fit the 'bigger picture'. First of all, it provides a cross-case analysis of the three cities. Furthermore, the perspective of M.R., the seventh interviewee is added to bring in both an insider and outsider perspective, as she has gone through a bidding process, but last year in Poland. She has also conversed with the bidding teams of Leuven, Molenbeek and Namur. The first subchapter highlights the deductive aspects of this research, returning to some of the theory discussed in chapters 2 and 3, to see if, and how, the findings of the interviews line up with the hypotheses of this dissertation. The second subchapter focuses on the inductive aspects of this research, discussing unexpected results extracted from the interviews.

6.1. Expected Fields of Tension

A clearly recurring theme for Leuven, Molenbeek and Namur is that ECOC bidding has become a tool to bridge internal division, whether geographic/territorial or social/cultural. Each of the candidates acknowledges existing local and territorial tensions, and aptly uses the ECOC process as an opportunity to interact with or solve them. In Namur and Leuven, there is a parallel. Both cities approach the bid as a way to get the region involved and connect city to region. Both claim the ECOC helps them show real commitment and investment towards the region. Leuven is a wealthy city, but it sits within a socio-economically diverse region that includes less rich municipalities. Namur and Leuven define this urban-regional divide as a major issue. For all three cities, the bidding process has brought together different cultural players, societal groups and partners by fostering networks to boost regional cooperation, thus reaffirming Richards and Marques' (2016) finding that network formation is one of the positive impacts of ECOC that create long-term success, regardless of winning.

The theory about stakeholder management (Clarkson, 1995; Freeman, 2010) and Arnaboldi and Spiller's (2011) discussion of collaboration issues resonate within the findings. All three cities face the challenge of managing a multitude of stakeholders who are part of different governance levels, whether that is local, regional, national or European. This underscores the presence and difficulties of multi-level governance (Liu,

2021), which appears most clearly in Molenbeek, where cultural governance is fragmented across Brussels' fragmented institutional and political landscape. Yet, Molenbeek team has created a new, overarching cultural strategy. This is an example of network governance because the decision-making is decentralised, negotiated by multiple actors, and slowly creating a new integrated framework (Jones et al., 1997). Leuven's team shows that, even with strong support from the city and institutions, governance still remains a balancing act. Their mention that trust must be continuously renegotiated echoes Clarkson's (1995) emphasis on maintaining all stakeholders satisfied. The three cities have experienced the challenge of controlling stakeholder satisfaction and expectations as described by Hansen and Laursen (2015), who not only mentioned stakeholder management but also operating within EU governance as a prevalent challenge. The Belgian cities attribute many of these difficulties with satisfying and uniting stakeholders to the scale of the ECOC bidding project and the speed at which it has to be developed, since governance and stakeholder development is a slow process that requires a great amount of effort and communication. M.R. validates stakeholder dynamics and governance as a field of tension, stating that every bid is based on frustration management, since there are so many actors involved that it is almost impossible to keep everyone satisfied.

As expected, European identity remains central to ECOC bidding. As Sassatelli (2002), Clopot and Strani (2019) and Lähdesmäki (2014) show, this is fluid, politically charged and hard to define. The findings in subchapter 5.1 highlight how each city attempts to close the gap between local and European identity. In theory, Molenbeek's vision finds itself somewhere on the line between 'unity' and 'unity in diversity', which is hard to pinpoint (Sassatelli, 2002). 'Europeanness' as defined by Gierat-Bieron (2018) is clearly present. Their concept of *sadaka* showcases 'europeanness' through generosity and solidarity within marginalised communities, which is bottom-up as discussed by Clopot and Strani (2019). This is an example of Sassatelli's critique of 'unity' being eurocentric and exclusionary (2002). Leuven initially struggled with justifying why they deserved to win the ECOC title. However, their response shows 'europeanisation', because they align their vision with institutional priorities (such as climate change), while viewing their own project as a 'laboratory', a space to experiment with and refine policy (Gierat-Bieron, 2018). The way Leuven portrays European identity is less cultural, but

more based on strategy and infrastructure. Namur's European identity is perhaps the hardest to pinpoint, but could be considered 'unity in diversity' since it uses *diffluence* and *confluence* to transform internal contradictions into a narrative that is cohesive and aligns itself with European values. In general, when comparing the three bids, what comes up is not a unified vision of European identity, but rather ideas that find themselves in different places on the spectrum of what it means to craft a European identity. These different shades of European identity are both enabled and constrained by how vague the concept of European identity is (Clopot & Strani, 2019; Patel, 2013). However, Sassatelli's (2013) 'eurocalisation' is remarkably present in all three bids.

Balancing local and European identity and motivating local stakeholders were identified by Rampton et al. (2015) as the two prevailing challenges for bidding cities in their official report about ECOC cities. As expected these are still two of the fields of tension identified in this dissertation.

6.2. Unexpected Fields of Tension

We can conclude that European identity and stakeholder dynamics and governance were rightfully expected to come up as fields of tension for Leuven, Namur and Molenbeek. However, other identified fields of tension are rather surprising. They reveal that the topics that are usually discussed in academic literature in relation to the bidding process are not always the main themes that are of importance for bidding teams, which underscores the gap in academic literature.

Firstly, the business of the ECOC network has not been discussed in academic literature, even though it is a prevalent topic when talking to the bidding teams. They more or less share the same opinion concerning the involvement of ECOC consultants: all three teams use the expertise, because of the enormous challenge that is first-time bidding, yet all three are weary and share critique. The risk of homogenisation is high, and it takes away their personal feeling with their project, which presumably feels like it partially transforms from a passion project for insiders into a prestige project for an outsider. Logistically, using experts makes sense, but in terms of creative integrity, there should be more regulations about this. Future research about the role of these 'experts' in the ECOC bidding process is necessary. M.R. shares Leuven, Molenbeek and Namur's views and

adds that the consulting business is even more present and palpable after winning the ECOC title.

The inter-city dynamics were not expected to come forward as a field of tension, but clearly are. The cities try to view each other as peers rather than adversaries, but still the pressure of winning stimulates competition alongside camaraderie. Even to an unbiased external researcher, they highlight their uniqueness and do so by comparing themselves to the other candidates. Each city actively aims to carve a niche: Leuven presents itself as an intellectual innovator, Namur as a social connector, and Molenbeek as a social change-maker. They acknowledge each other's niches and fortes, which highlights the collaborative spirit that is still present. M.R. discusses how, in her experience, the three Belgian teams are very feminine. In the literal sense of the word, the bids are led by women, but also figuratively, the teams are feminine in the sense that all three bids revolve around emotive themes like solidarity, generosity, being open and democratic. It raises the question if different teams with more dominant themes echoing perhaps more patriarchal dynamics, would foster different dynamics.

In general, there is a surprising amount of critique on the ECOC initiative, its rules and form. It would be interesting to conduct more research about this experience of bidding teams to amplify this critical voice. The fields of tension relating to the European Commission criteria and jury as well as the field of tension relating to balancing mobilisation and uncertainty are examples. The formal requirements imposed on the bid books are limiting for the bidding teams, and even feel outdated to some. They also force bidding teams to create concise budgeting plans and cultural programs for an ECOC year that is still five years in the future. Garcia and Cox (2013) already concluded that bid makers would prefer to focus on developing a unique vision rather than a detailed plan. That was over a decade ago, and still current bidding teams raise the same question. In terms of mobilisation, the findings point out that there should be more attention and even support from the EU directed towards building a long-lasting legacy in case a city does not become ECOC. For Molenbeek for example it is hard to navigate if and how their bid can a long-term benefits and create change, since there is no guidance or knowledge exchange about how to achieve that regardless of winning.

Another inductive result that critiques the ECOC policy is the field of tension created by the phase transition between the preselection stage and the selection stage.

Bidding teams find it particularly challenging to concretise their plans to the desired level of the jury panel, which includes exact budgets, artistic programming for their ECOC year, revisions for all feedback received in the preselection round etc. Interestingly, this mirrors one of the findings of the research of Hansen and Laursen (2015), an article that already proved itself to be a methodological guide for this research. Hansen and Laursen inductively identified management-related challenges, one of which was the change brought along by the transition from bidding city to designated ECOC. Although this parallel was unexpected, this master's thesis mirrors that challenge while taking it one step further: by identifying phase transition as a field of tension (this thesis' equivalent of Hansen and Laursen's challenges) for bidding cities, Hansen and Laursen's finding is echoed and legitimised on an even smaller level, during an even earlier stage of the ECOC process. This once again reinforces the need for more academic attention and theory-development about the bidding stage.

Moreover, M.R. validates the tension that phase transition and the policy concerning official requirements bring along. It is simply impossible to integrate everything the Commission desires and provide an answer to all objectives and all criteria. Furthermore, she critiques the process beyond the bidding stage. The further you get in the process, the more disadvantages you experience. The greatest disadvantage she names as a designated ECOC city is that the Melina Mercouri prize is only awarded at the end of the executed ECOC year. This means the implementation process starts without any initial funding from the EU, which is a great struggle. 'The implementation is a very, very hard process (...) because there are also political tensions and local tensions and everybody's expecting, you know, a European capital, but there is nothing, and you have to invent the world' (M.R.). And even after the Mercouri prize is awarded during the ECOC year, that is still only a fraction of what it actually costs to be ECOC. For the European Union, this initiative does not cost a lot, yet they expect a lot in return. M.R. raises the question if there is to a certain level greenwashing and culturewashing happening. Earlier in the interview, she related Molenbeek's *sadaka* to 'gift economy', stating that Molenbeek's radical state of mind of generosity critiques existing economic paradigms and proposes an alternative economy of selfless giving for the future. When combining these two trains of thought, it is interesting to notice that Molenbeek's indirect critique on neoliberal capitalism is done under the banner of an initiative that reflects a

neoliberal, capitalist side of the European Union in terms of low financial investment and a high expected return.

Combining all these perspectives, one ought to ask the question if competition is still the right format to be designated ECOC. This research shows that these cities are very focused on collaboration, long-term legacy and cultural exchange. Keeping the fields of tension in mind, there would be clear benefits to the EU revising the preliminary ECOC stages and reframing it into a more collaborative experience. As for now, creating a lasting legacy is hard for ECOCs, let alone as a non-winner participating in the bidding process. Given more regulations and transparency, perhaps the system could be translated into a new, more inclusive, more collaborative process that eliminates some of these fields of tension. In any case, the Belgian bidding teams are not the only ones raising questions like these. M.R. explains that Poland launched its own national ECOC (similar to UKCOC) to create space for the bidding cities that lost to implement their strategy and program after all.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the intricate and academically undertheorized bidding process for the ECOC title, focusing on the 2030 Belgian candidates Leuven, Namur and Molenbeek. It aimed to give an answer to the following question: 'When reflecting on the bidding process of Leuven, Namur and Molenbeek to become the Belgian ECOC in 2030, what are the main fields of tension and how do they experience and negotiate these?' Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, eight 'fields of tension' were identified.

1. Local identity and European narrative
2. Navigating the European Commission
3. Inter-city dynamics
4. Phase transition
5. Stakeholder management and governance
6. Balancing mobilisation and uncertainty
7. Artistic integrity
8. The business of the ECOC network

These are pressure points that shape and influence the internal workings of the bidding teams. The result is a new, preliminary and robust framework that underscores the complex negotiations, numerous decisions and challenges cities have to face during the bidding process of an initiative of this scale. In a scholarly field that is dominated by post-designation studies and impact studies, the creation of this framework fills in a research gap.

The framework combined deductive and inductive research, focussing on the latter to define the fields of tension. In order to analyse more bidding cities in the future, the framework could be used deductively. Future research could analyse bids and bidding teams through interviews or thematic analysis of bid books by focusing on these specific fields of tension. In doing so, the generalisability of this framework can be assessed. Perhaps, other fields of tension arise in different cities. Perhaps the same fields of tension arise, but the way teams deal with them differs. However, the inductive coding process

has uncovered fields of tension that are abstract to a high degree, so that they can be considered fields of tension that other cities also recognise. Furthermore, this is affirmed by the interview with M.R., missionholder for Lublin 2029, who agrees with these fields of tension. Interestingly, she recognises these fields of tension, but fills them in differently because of her own city's unique background.

A possible next step for continuing research could therefore be to create categories for bidding cities, based on these themes, in order to anticipate what type of tension would arise most and what field will require the most attention of future bidding cities. In doing so, this framework contributes to making the overwhelming bidding process more transparent for future candidates, by serving as a guide for future bidding cities of what to anticipate. Furthermore, it would also be very interesting if, in a few years' time, new research would be conducted about the behind-the-scenes dynamics and fields of tension for the Belgian ECOC of 2030. In doing so, the findings of this thesis could be used for a longitudinal, comparative study. There is no academic literature yet that compares all different stages ECOC teams go through. Future research could build on this thesis to identify internal processes that statistically correlate with success, to track the evolution of bidding strategies and fields of tension in longitudinal studies, to compare bid governance across different countries or regions in Europe, to compare pre-selection with post-selection implementation (researchers could track the evolution to see which elements of a bid survive in practice, and how that relates to internal processes identified in this thesis), among other things. Moreover, the coding scheme in this dissertation, organised around thematic fields of tension, can serve as a template for researchers examining similar multi-actor, multi-level cultural processes.

Not only is this research useful for future bidding teams. The findings unearth critique on the policy and format of the ECOC and the bidding process. Perhaps this study could serve as a testimony to instigate structural changes to meet the needs of bidding cities and alleviate the pressure on their shoulders to a certain extent. It could help policymakers to reassess the ECOC criteria and ensure that they do not disproportionately reward format over substance, or compliance over bold innovation.

This dissertation has its limitations and challenges too. There were certain methodological constraints that need to be taken into account. As this research was conducted at the most demanding time in the bidding process, it was not possible to

interview every member of the three teams. A higher variety of functions within the teams could create an even more nuanced discussion of the fields of tension. Another critique on this dissertation is that each interviewee was interviewed only once. In order to fully understand if a theme is applicable to be generalised into a framework and become a field of tension, it would have been nice to do a second round of interviews, adopting a more grounded theory approach, where results lead to further, adapted research and vice versa until the validity of the uncovered framework is proven. This would also allow for a deeper cross-case analysis of certain topics.

In conclusion, the behind-the-scenes fields of tension of the Belgian 2030 ECOC bids are complex and nuanced, and taking a hybrid inductive and deductive approach to uncover fields of tension was a risk. However, by creating a framework, this thesis increases the understanding of bidding, while at the same time providing an in-depth overview of the Belgian 2030 ECOC bids.

8. APPENDIX

8.1. Interview guide

Introductory Questions

Can you describe your role in the ECOC bid team of your city?

When did your city decide to apply for the ECOC title, and what was the main motivation?

Main Questions

How would you describe the identity your city is presenting in the bid? What are the key narratives that define your bid?

How did your team approach the ECOC's official criteria?

What trade-offs or compromises have you had to make while preparing the bid?

What have been some of the biggest challenges so far while preparing the bid and during the bidding process?

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently so far?

Do you think the bid will have an impact, even if your city does not win?

Closing Questions

Is there anything important about your city's bid or process that we haven't talked about yet, but you believe should be mentioned?

Do you have another person you can refer me to as a future respondent for this research?

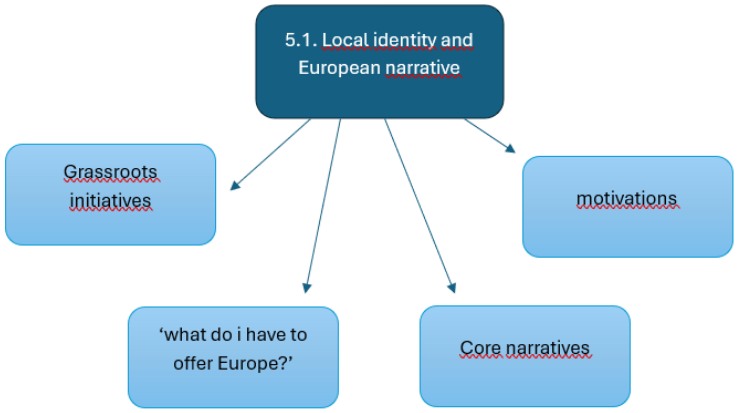
8.2. Example of coding

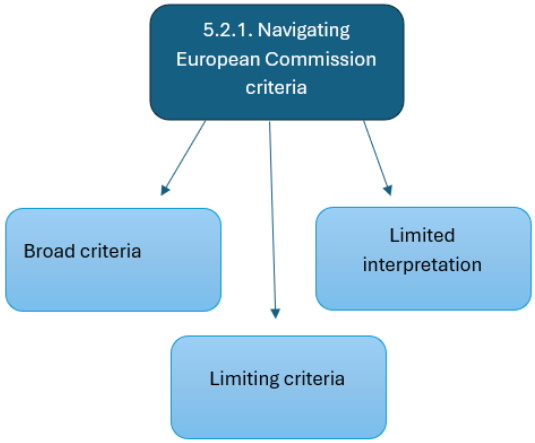
Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
capitalising on the other cities by seeing what they have done	benchmarking	Intercity dynamics
happy to read other bidbooks but tried not to focus on it or compare too much, you can learn from it but want to focus on your own		
it was a challenge to defend why Leuven deserved to be ECOC		
Leuven shared bidbook 1 earlier than others		

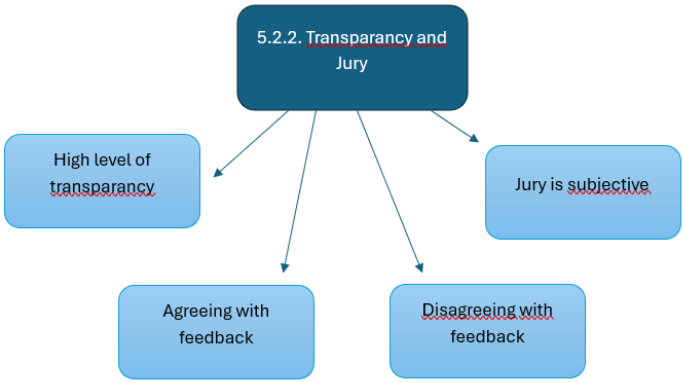
Namur started later than the other cities		
panel report is definitely analysed again and we look at the reviews of other cities		
there is benchmarking with other ECOCs/bids, comparing is a useful exercise		
we actively differentiate from the other cities		
we are not the jury's favorite		
we don't fit into the recent trends of ECOC to develop cities		
we look at other cities' strengths and make sure those are not our weaknesses		
you always want to do more, and you compare other bids and think those are better but you have to be confident		
Brussels has already been ECOC		
it is easier for the jury to play it safe leuven would be a safe choice	Explicitly anti-the other	
Leuven would be super happy for the other cities, but the least for Namur		
ECOC is not a cherry on top of the cake, there is an urgency in Molenbeek, and the title should be given to those who need it		
Flanders has already brought forth 2 ECOCs, Wallonia only 1		
Molenbeek takes a diffent approach of the architecture of ECOC year		
Namur is the Wallonian candidate, and Wallonia is economically and socially and infrastructurally behind on Flanders	Explicitly pro-oneself	
Namur needs ECOC the most		
our bid is unique		
our bid is unique because we have given ourself freedom within the criteria		
we could have used more time to prepare our bid		
we have the best bid but low chance of winning		
we need to win for Belgium and Europe, not for Leuven		
all 3 bids tell great, personal stories	Mutual respect	

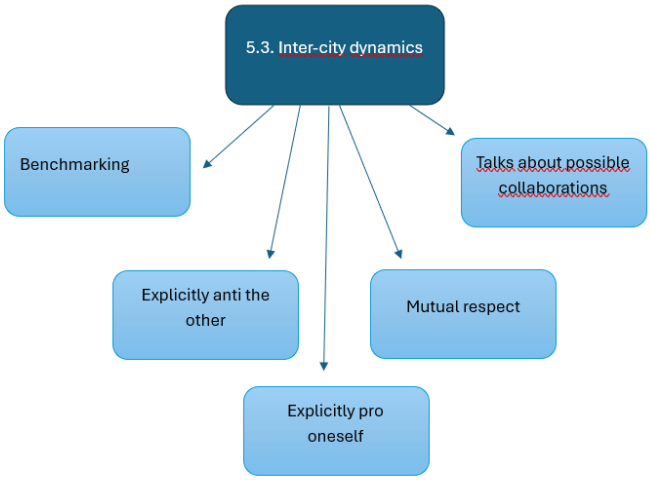
Molenbeek has a harder political situation		
the three cities built a connection, and there is a great likeness in all of the projects		
we like the other bids too		
at some point, there were conversations about joining forces as the three women	Talks about potential collaborations	
geographically the cities find themselves close to eachother		
is competition the right formula? this is supposed to support cities and how does Europe support this? where is the co-operation from the EU side, where is the EU expert team?		
there are talks about collaboration with Ghent, Bruges and Kortrijk		
there are talks about collaborations w the other cities		
there should be collaboration after the winner is announced so all cities can build on their 'legacy'		

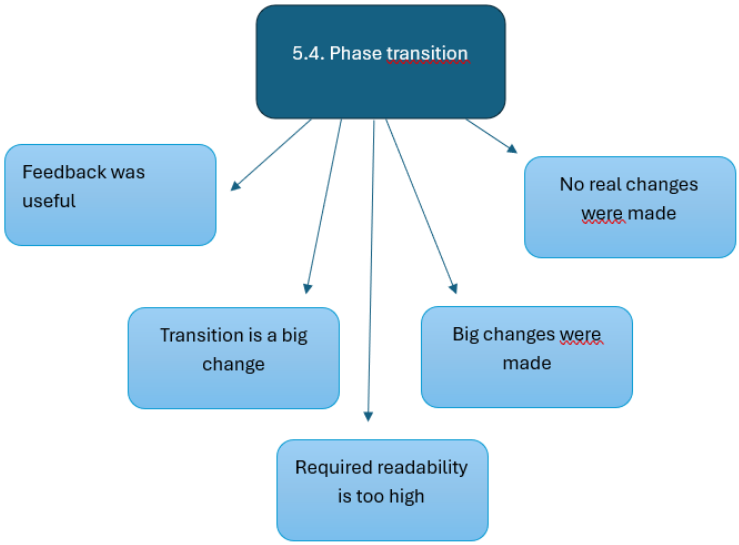
8.3. Coding trees



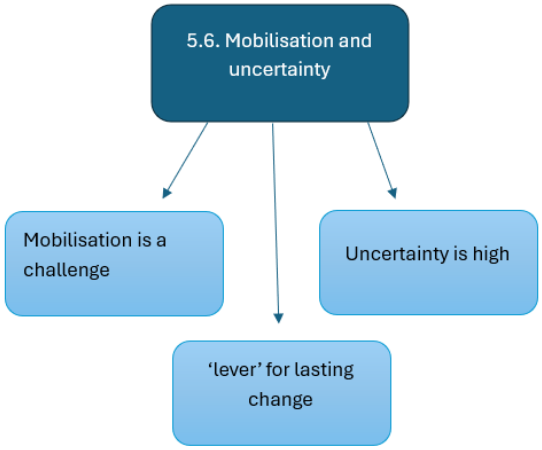

5.2.1. Navigating European Commission criteria
Broad criteria
Limited interpretation
Limiting criteria

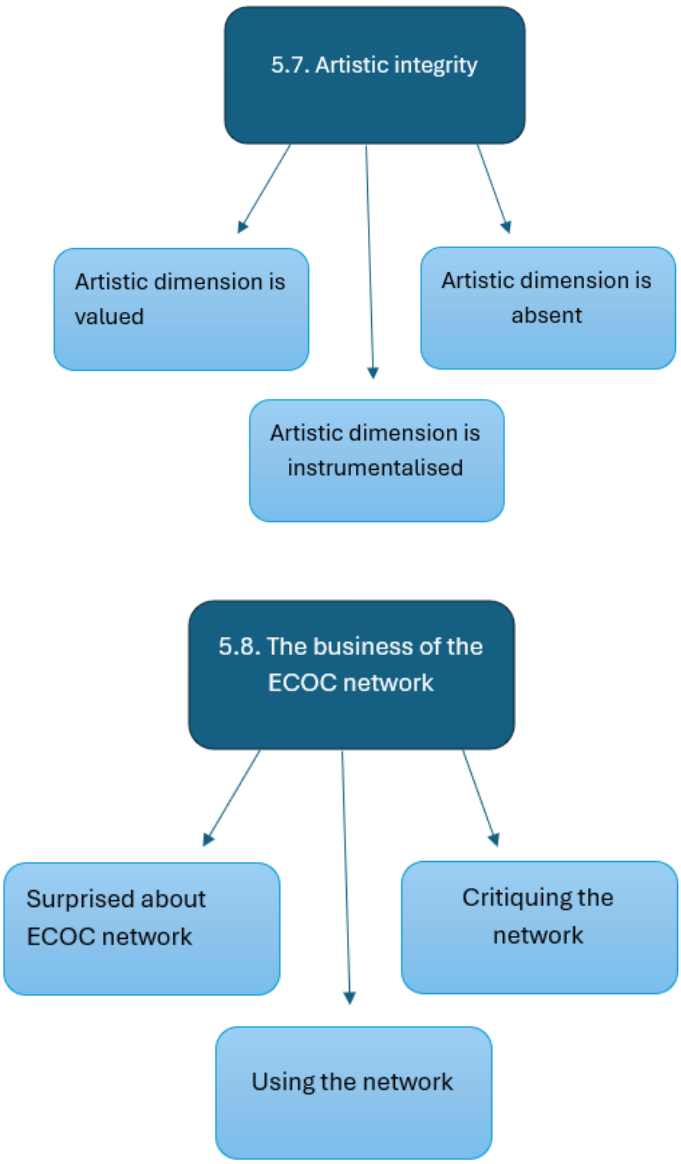

5.2.2. Transparancy and Jury
High level of transparancy
Jury is subjective
Agreeing with feedback
Disagreeing with feedback


5.3. Inter-city dynamics
Benchmarking
Talks about possible collaborations
Explicitly anti the other
Mutual respect
Explicitly pro oneself


5.4. Phase transition
Feedback was useful
No real changes were made
Transition is a big change
Big changes were made
Required readability is too high

5.5. Governance and stakeholder dynamics
Governance is a challenge
Stakeholder management is a challenge
There is already a lasting impact


5.6. Mobilisation and uncertainty
Mobilisation is a challenge
Uncertainty is high
'lever' for lasting change



8.4. AI form

Student Information
Name: Tim Derez
Student ID: 738170
Course Name: Master Thesis
Instructor Name: Dr. Carlotta Scioldo
Assignment Title: FRAMING THE BID
THE FIELDS OF TENSION BEHIND THE SCENES OF BELGIUM'S 2030 EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE BIDS
Date: 13/06/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works with limited user input.

GenAI use could include, but is not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Quillbot)
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL)
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding, debugging code, Gemini Deep Research)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books. (e.g. Perplexity AI)
-

For any GenAI task, 1) it must be permitted by the course and 2) you are responsible for verifying the accuracy of the outputs used in any submission. Improper use of sources obtained from GenAI could constitute academic fraud.

Also, 3) the requested prompts/logs (under Extent of AI Usage below) may be either screenshots or textual copies. The appendix can be included as part of the main submission or submitted as a separate document. Check with your lecturer.

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [I used vizard.ai to make transcriptions of the recordings of my interviews. These transcriptions have been check by manually afterwards to correct all mistakes. I also used Deepl to translate the quotes of my interviews, since I conducted all interviews in Dutch and French. Again, the output was checked before adding it to the dissertation], in the process of creating parts or components of my course assignment. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of the assignment.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Tim Derez
Date of Signature: 13/06/2025

Extent of AI Usage
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and

decision-making involved in completing the assignment were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of my GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

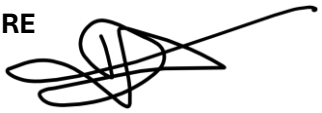
Signature: Tim Derez
Date of Signature: 13/06/2025

8.5. Informed Consent Form

Project Title and version	Framing The Bid: The Behind-The-Scenes Negotiation of Belgium's 2030 European Capital of Culture Bids (working title)
Name of Principal Investigator	Tim Derez

Name of Organisation	Erasmus University Rotterdam – Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication.
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Tim Derez. I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the Belgian bidding cities for the European Capital of Culture 2030. The purpose of this research project is to explore how the Belgian cities of Namur, Leuven, and Molenbeek navigate the challenges, tensions, and strategic trade-offs involved in aligning their local cultural identities with the expectations of the European Commission during the preparation of their bids for the European Capital of Culture 2030.
Procedures	You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 1 hour. You will be asked questions about your role in the preparation of the ECoC bid, the challenges and constraints encountered during the bidding process, the strategies used to align the city's cultural identity with European expectations, and the trade-offs or compromises made in constructing the final narrative and project plan. Sample questions include: “How would you describe the narratives and identity your city is presenting in the bid?”. You must be at least 18 years old.
Potential and anti-cipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
Potential Benefits	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating you may better understand the process of preparing an ECoC bid. The broader goal of this research is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how cities strategically negotiate cultural identity and expectations within European initiatives like the European Capital of Culture, and to offer insights into the dynamics of soft governance, urban cultural policy, and identity construction in contemporary Europe.
Sharing the results	Your plan for sharing the findings with the participants should be provided. If you have a plan and a timeline for the sharing of information, include the details. You may also inform the participant that the research findings will be shared more broadly, for example, through publications and conferences.

Confidentiality	Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request. As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator: 738170td@student.eur.nl
Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, please contact the coordinator of the Bachelor Graduation Project, Dr. Débora Póvoa (povoa@eshcc.eur.nl). If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.
Audio recording	I consent to having my interview audio recorded ☒ yes ☐ no

Secondary use	I consent to have the data be used for secondary analysis ☒ yes ☐ no	
Signature and Date	**NAME PARTICIPANT**	**NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR** **Tim Derez**
	SIGNATURE	**SIGNATURE** 
	DATE	**DATE** **06/05/2025**

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