

# European Capitals of Culture as Incentives for the Construction of European Identity?

Origins and changes of

“one of the most visible and prestigious initiatives of the European Union”

**Jürgen Mittag**

Paper prepared for the *Biennial Conference of the European Union Studies Association*, Boston March 3-5, 2011

– draft version, please do not quote –

## **Corresponding Address**

Prof. Dr. Jürgen Mittag  
Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln  
Institut für Europäische Sportentwicklung  
und Freizeitforschung  
Am Sportpark Müngersdorf 6  
50933 Köln

[juergen.mittag@rub.de](mailto:juergen.mittag@rub.de)

\*\*\*\*\*

Tel. +49-(0)221-4982-2690

Fax. +49-(0)221-4982-8150

<http://www.dshs-koeln.de/iesf/>

## Introduction

According to the European Commission the „European Capital of Culture” programme can be considered as one of the most renowned cultural activities in Europe. It is stated that the “European Capitals of Culture are a flagship cultural initiative of the European Union, possibly the best known and most appreciated by European citizens.”<sup>1</sup> Since the idea of European Cities/Capitals of Culture has been launched in 1983, the capability of the programme to foster European integration has always been a major issue of debate.<sup>2</sup> The European Capital of Culture initiative was designed to strengthen European identity particularly in times when the “European Community” was facing problems of acceptance and most notably linked with considerable struggles in agriculture policy. However, the title holders of the last 25 years have not just pursued the European way and chosen rather specific ways to shape and alter the programme.

Based on empirical analysis this paper argues that the initiative has tremendously changed during the last two decades and turned out to be a pawn in the hand of politicians, officials of the cultural sector but also city planners, marketing experts, representatives of tourism industry and artists alike. While the implementation of the concept of the European Capitals of Culture was initially considered as a mean to enhance European identity, in later years the programme has also been used to foster certain images of the cities and to promote tourism.

In its first part the paper aims at analysing the origins of the European Capital of Culture programme. This second part includes references to the legal status and the organisational developments in the course of time (1985-2010) from an historical point of view. A third part refers to the conceptualisation of culture as well as the strategies of the title-holders in view of tourism, city advertising, urban reconversion and the inclusion of the local population. Different periods as well as reasons for the alteration of strategies and perceptions will be identified. In its final part the paper critically reflects the master narrative of a European success story and analyses in how far the European dimension of this cultural programme has been dedicated to increase European integration. This evaluation will reflect in how far cities have managed to establish a “dialogue” between different European cultures.

---

<sup>1</sup> European Communities, *European Capitals of Culture: the road to success. From 1985 to 2010*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009, Foreword.

<sup>2</sup> Until 2004 the initiative was officially labelled “European City of Culture”. The title “European Capital of Culture” has been introduced in May 1999 when the intergovernmental action was established as a community action. As the original proposal permitted both notions and as some of the designated cities already used the title “European Capital of Culture” in the 1980s, a clear differentiation is not possible. In the course of this contribution it will generally be referred to the notion “European Capital of Culture”.

## Current Status of Research

Despite the “official” ascription as the most renowned initiative of the European Commission, the benevolent statements in the course of the jubilee, a number of 42 cities that has been awarded as Capitals/Cities of Culture in Europe until the end of 2010 and the world-wide imitation of the concept, the general knowledge on the initiative is rather limited. Although every year a countless abundance of media articles shed some light on the respective title-holders the background of the initiative and its changes are as unknown as the cultural approaches that have been pursued by the cities in the last 25 years.

The lack of academic reflection on the European Capital of Culture initiative can primarily be explained with the rotating and temporary character of this annual event. It causes not only difficulties to get hold of the documents and materials but also to obtain access to archives in such a large number of cities – just in case the material has been filed at all. Beyond the official brochure of the European Commission, two recent publications can be regarded as first academic approaches to analyse the initiative from a historical perspective. While Monica Sassatelli’s study has exploited the European Capital of Culture event as a case study to analyse the potential of cultural means in order to increase European identity<sup>3</sup> a volume edited by the author of this article has investigated primarily the links between the political and the cultural means of the initiative and its changes in the course of time.<sup>4</sup>

A number of cultural functionaries – some of them had been accountable for the cultural programme of title-holders and thus have become part of the debate itself – have carried out sizeable studies on the European Capitals of Culture. Most relevant are the studies of John Myerscough for the European Capitals until 1994,<sup>5</sup> the study on the year 2000 by GiannaLia Cogliandro<sup>6</sup> and various studies carried out under the guidance of Robert Palmer who had been in charge of the programme in the years 1990 (Glasgow) and

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Monica Sassatelli (2009): *Becoming Europeans. Cultural Identity and Cultural Policies*, Houndmills: Palgrave. See as well Monica Sassatelli (2002): *Imagined Europe. The shaping of a European Cultural Identity through EU Cultural Policy*, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 4, pp. 435-451 and Monica Sassatelli (2008): *European Cultural Space in the European Cities of Culture*, in: *European Societies* 10:2, pp. 225-245.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jürgen Mittag (2008): *Die Idee der Kulturhauptstadt Europas: Vom Instrument europäischer Identitätsstiftung zum tourismusträchtigen Publikumsmagneten*, in: Jürgen Mittag (ed.): *Die Idee der Kulturhauptstadt Europas. Anfänge, Ausgestaltung und Auswirkungen europäischer Kulturpolitik*, Essen: Klartext, pp. 55-96. See as well Jürgen Mittag/Kathrin Oerters (2009): *Kreativwirtschaft und Kulturhauptstadt: Katalysatoren urbaner Entwicklung in altindustriellen Ballungsregionen?* in: Gudrun Quenzel (ed.): *Entwicklungsfaktor Kultur. Studien zum kulturellen und ökonomischen Potential der europäischen Stadt*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 61-94 and Kathrin Oerters/Jürgen Mittag: *European Capitals of Culture as Incentives for Local Transformation and Creative Economies: Tendencies – Examples – Assessments*, in: Wim Coudenys (ed.), *Whose Culture(s)?*, Liverpool: UNeECC Forum, vol. 1, 2010, S. 70-97. 245.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Myerscough, *European Cities of Culture and Cultural Months. Full Report. Study prepared for the Network of Cultural Cities of Europe, Glasgow 1994.*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. GiannaLia Cogliandro, *European Cities of Culture for the year 2000. A wealth of urban cultures for the celebration of the turn of the century, Final report, 2001.*

2000 (Brussels).<sup>7</sup> Most empirical evidence we have on the different European Capitals of Culture is taken from these studies following a systematic approach and method in order to prepare the basis for a comparative dimension.

In addition to this, a limited number of studies have been carried out on particular cities. While there is hardly any knowledge on the early title holders,<sup>8</sup> the year 1990 has been thoroughly (and controversially) explored.<sup>9</sup> Much less research has been done on the Capitals of Culture between 1991 and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Just in the last few years more detailed research has started predominantly on the title holders of the year 2010.<sup>11</sup> It is worth pointing out the number of engaged papers on the issue by students from various disciplines. A large number of empirical data have been compiled by them up to day. However, due to the nature of these studies most papers just refer to one city or an even more restricted scope.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Robert Palmer/Rae Associates: *European Cities and Capitals of Culture. Study Prepared for the European Commission, Part I and II, Brussels 2004* and Robert Palmer and Greg Richards, *European Cultural Capital Report 993 2007/2009, Part I and II, Arnhem: ATLAS, 2007*. See as well Greg Richards, *The European Cultural Capital Event: Strategic Weapon in the Cultural Arms Race?*, in: *The International Journal of Cultural Policy* 2 (2000), pp. 159-181.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Amalia van Gent (1988): „Und setzt es ein für alle Ewigkeit...“. Athen – Kulturhauptstadt Europas 1985, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 4, pp. 479-482; Vittorino Brunelli (1988): *Rettung aus der Kreativitätskrise? Florenz – Kulturhauptstadt Europas 1986*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 4, pp. 483-486; Steve Austen (1988): *Amsterdam – Cultural Capital of Europe 1987*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 4, pp. 487-492; Volker Hassemer (1988): *Berlin – Kulturstadt Europas 1988. Das Programm und seine Organisation*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 4, pp. 513-517, hier S. 513; Roswitha Erbslöh (1988): *Kein Programm, kein Budget: Paris – Kulturhauptstadt Europas 1989*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 4, pp. 565-567 und als Überblick: Kathinka Dittrich von Weringh (1988): *Die „Entdeckung“ der Kultur Europas*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 4, pp. 473-478.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sam Warnock (1988), *Partnership – the Key to Success. Glasgow 1990 – Cultural Capital of Europe*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 4 (1988), pp. 568-572; John Myerscough (1994), *Measuring the impact of the arts: the Glasgow 1990 experience*, in: *Journal of the Market Research Society* 34/4, pp. 323-335; P. Booth/R. Doyle (1994), *See Glasgow, see culture*, in: Franco Bianchini/Michael Parkinson (eds.): *Cultural policy and urban regeneration: the West European experience*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Beatriz García (2004), *Urban Regeneration, Arts Programming and Major events: Glasgow 1990, Sydney 2000 and Barcelona 2004*, in: D. Stevenson (ed.), *Special Issue of the International Journal of Cultural Policy: Urban Space and the Uses of Culture* 1, pp. 103-118; Gerry Mooney, *Cultural Policy as Urban Transformation? Critical Reflections on Glasgow, European City of Culture 1990*, in: *Local Economy* 19/4 (2004), pp. 327-340; Beatriz García (2005), *Deconstructing the City of Culture: The long-term cultural legacies of Glasgow 1990*, in: *Urban Studies* 5/6, pp. 841-867.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Erik Hitters (2000), *The Social and Political Construction of a European Cultural Capital: Rotterdam 2001*, in: *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 2; Pier Luigi Sacco/Giorgio Tavano Blessi (2007), *European Culture Capitals and Local Development Strategies: Comparing the Genoa and Lille 2004 Cases*, in: *Homo Oeconomicus* 24 /1, pp. 111-141.

<sup>11</sup> See in particular Julia Frohne/Katharina Langsch/Fritz Pleitgen/Oliver Scheytt (2010), *RUHR. Vom Mythos zur Marke. Marketing und PR für die Kulturhauptstadt Europas RUHR.2010*, Essen: Klartext and Deniz Gök-türk/Levent Soysal/Ipek Türeli (eds.) (2010): *Orienting Istanbul. Cultural Capital of Europe?*, Routledge: London/New York.

<sup>12</sup> For unpublished academic studies see the websites: <<http://wissenschaft2010.de/de/k3.Forschungen-Ergebnisse.htm>> and <[www.ecoc-doc-athens.eu/research.html](http://www.ecoc-doc-athens.eu/research.html)>.

<b>Year</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Country</b>
1985	Athens	Greece
1986	Florence	Italy
1987	Amsterdam	Netherlands
1988	(West) Berlin	(Federal Republic) Germany
1989	Paris	France
1990	Glasgow	United Kingdom
1991	Dublin	Ireland
1992	Madrid	Spain
1993	Antwerp	Belgium
1994	Lisbon	Portugal
1995	Luxemburg	Luxembourg
1996	Copenhagen	Denmark
1997	Thessaloniki	Greece
1998	Stockholm	Sweden
1999	Weimar	Germany
2000	Avignon Bergen Bologna Brussels Helsinki Krakow Prague Reykjavik Santiago de Compostela	France Norway Italy Belgium Finland Poland Czech Republic Iceland Spain
2001	Oporto Rotterdam	Portugal Netherlands
2002	Salamanca Bruges	Spain Belgium
2003	Graz	Austria
2004	Lille Genoa	France Italy
2005	Cork	Ireland
2006	Patras	Greece
2007	Luxemburg (region) Sibiu	Luxembourg Romania
2008	Liverpool Stavanger	United Kingdom Norway
2009	Linz Vilnius	Austria Lithuania
2010	Essen (Ruhr) Area) Pécs Istanbul	Germany Hungary Turkey
2011	Turku Tallinn	Finland Estonia
2012	Guimarães Maribor	Portugal Slovenia
2013	Marseille Košice	France Slovakia
2014	Umeå Riga	Sweden Latvia
2015	Mons Pilsen	Belgium Czech Republic

2016		Spain Poland
2017		Denmark Cyprus

## The origins

In the early years of modern European integration, during the 1950s, culture hardly played any role as a European policy. European cooperation, for the most part based on Jean Monnet's functionalist approach, primarily aimed at technical cooperation of experts in economic terms (ECSC and EEC), whereas member states still regarded cultural issues as a "domaine reserve".<sup>13</sup> When cultural topics were discussed at European level at all, these debates took place within the Council of Europe, which merely produces non-binding decisions and allows national vetoes.<sup>14</sup>

However, starting with the summits at The Hague (1969) and at Paris (1972) the number of proposals to encourage European integration by the use of cultural means increased.<sup>15</sup> Due to the rather negative perception of the EC in the early 1980s the European Council and the Commission alike debated a number of approaches to improve the public awareness of European integration. Since the people did no longer link the EC with a successful peace story yet with endless quarrels on agriculture deficiencies – most notably the so-called butter mountains and milk lakes – culture gained in importance, especially in conjunction with the concept of a "people's Europe".<sup>16</sup> Since the European Community could hardly rely on any offers for symbolic identification, these means had still to be invented. A number of blueprints had been apparent. The Fête de la Musique, introduced in 1981 by the popular French minister for cultural affairs, Jack Lang, based on ideas of Maurice Fleuret, and hold for the first time in 1982 Paris was considered as a mean to endorse symbolic identification.<sup>17</sup> The festival had been initiated to support the role of the French cities and municipalities and could be considered as one component in Mitterrand's project of regionalisation in France.<sup>18</sup> The decision in

<sup>13</sup> Broadly discussed in a large number of publications, cf. in particular Michael Wintle (ed.), *Culture and identity in Europe. Perceptions of Divergence and Unity in Past and Present*, Aldershot: Brookfield [Vt.], 1996; Caroline Brossat (1999), *La culture européenne: définitions et enjeu*, Brussels: Bruylant.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Kruse (1993), *Europäische Kulturpolitik am Beispiel des Europarats*, Münster/Hamburg: LIT-Verlag.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jan van der Harst (2003): *The 1969 Hague Summit: a New Start for Europe*, in: *Journal of European Integration History* 2, pp 5-11.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jürgen Nielsen-Sikora (2009): *Ein Europa der Bürger? Anspruch und Wirklichkeit der europäischen Einigung – eine Spurensuche*, Baden-Baden: Nomos.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Veitl/Noémi Duchemin (2000): *Maurice Fleuret: une politique démocratique de la musique*. La Documentation Française, Paris.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Vincent Hoffmann-Martinot (2005): *Zentralisierung und Dezentralisierung*, in: Adolf Kimmel et al. (eds.): *Länderbericht Frankreich*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, pp. 323-341.

1983 to extend the Fête de la Musique to all French municipalities attracted high media attention.

In November 1983 the Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri – a former actress, well-known for her movies “Never on Sunday, Topkapi, Promise at Dawn” and a fighter in the resistance movement against the Greek military regime – invited her colleagues to Athens to the first informal meeting of the ministers in charge of cultural affairs. In her welcome reception she presented the idea of promoting knowledge on European cultures within the EC member states. She is quoted with the words:

“Our role as Ministers of Culture is clear. [...] Culture is the soul of society. Therefore, our foremost duty is to look at the foundations and nature of this Community. [...] The determining factor of a European identity lies precisely on respecting these diversities with the aim of creating a dialogue between the cultures of Europe. It is time for our voice to be heard as loud as that of the technocrats. Culture, art and creativity are not less important than technology, commerce and the economy.”<sup>19</sup>

Against this backdrop Melina Mercouri introduced at the summit the idea to establish a project she called “European City of Culture”. Supported by Jack Lang she intended with her plan to strengthen the general acceptance of European integration. In times of a so-called “sclerosis” when the EC was facing substantial problems in the agrarian and budgetary sector, the initiative aimed at strengthening both the rather weak European identity and the acceptance of European integration by establishing more distinct references towards the roots of a mutual European culture. On that note the Netherland minister for cultural affairs wrote to the mayor of Amsterdam: „Europe is going through a difficult period, and this may be the time to pay extra attention to culture.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to this, Melina Mercouri expected at least some positive effects for the Greece presidency in 1983 that suffered from some political “follies” of its prime minister Papandreou<sup>21</sup> and the controversies of the member states on agricultural and financial matters. When the idea of a European City/Capital of Culture was discussed by the ministers of cultural affairs Mercouri’s proposal was given a positive response. The official acceptance can be explained with the intergovernmental character of the proposal – beyond

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Spyros Mercouris, the brother of Melina Mercouri, who had been in charge of the cultural programme of Athens 1985. Cf. Spyros Mercouris (2006): The productivity of culture – European Cultural Capital Cities, its history and the development opportunities they create, unpublished manuscript, Weimar, p. 2; for the same quote: Europe’s cultural & political voice – The role of Cultural Capitals of Europe, unpublished manuscript, Liverpool 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Steve Austen (1988): Amsterdam – Cultural Capital of Europe 1987, in: Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch 4, S. 487-492, hier S. 487.

<sup>21</sup> See John Loulis (1985): Greece under Papandreou. NATO’s Ambivalent Partner, Institute for European Defense and Strategic Studies, p. 24.

community treaties and without any legal basis. Moreover, the purposely vague regulations paved the way for yet one of the most successful cultural initiatives in Europe. When the European City/Capital of Culture was introduced in November 1983 the ministers did neither establish distinctive regulations concerning the organisation of the programme nor did they define any precise criteria with regard to the nomination. All arrangements have been left to the member states and their cities. The EC member states just decided to unanimously select cities worthy of hosting the event, while the European Commission awarded a grant each year to the respective city. Very generally, only the succeeding rule has been established:

“The Ministers responsible for Cultural Affairs consider that the 'European City of Culture' event should be the expression of a culture which, in its historical emergence and contemporary development, is characterized by having both common elements and a richness born of diversity. The event has been established to help bring the peoples of the Member States closer together, but account should be taken of wider European cultural affinities. The event should open up to the European public particular aspects of the culture of the city, region or country concerned. It may also concentrate on the city concerned a number of cultural contributions from other Member States, primarily for the benefit of the inhabitants of the particular region. Between these two poles, a wide variety of emphases can be placed and inter-related themes chosen so as to enhance the city concerned and mark the particular occasion, if any, which has provided a reason for choosing it.”<sup>22</sup>

Based on this notion the European City/Capital of Culture offered an ideal projection to reconcile the interests of all member states: The project did not cause high expenditures; each country is given its turn as a fixed schedule and every year a city from a different member state is allowed will be nominated as Capital of Culture.

### **The change of the program: political perspectives**

Three phases of political and legal development of the Capital of Culture project can be identified. The first one includes the time period between Melina Mercouri's project proposal in 1983 and the year 1990. In light of mainly spontaneous and non institutionalised forms of organisation and at a rather low level of involvement of the EC bodies this period can be characterised as “initial phase”.

---

<sup>22</sup> Official Journal (1985): 3-4.

In the 1990s – without having any particular moment in mind – the preconditions for the Capital of Culture project significantly changed. The attractiveness of the programme demanded multiple modifications of the application procedure which led to stronger regulations that, however, for the most part remained outside the Treaties. This second stage of the Capital of Culture project can be called “trial and error phase”, as more stable selection procedures and decision-making structures began to emerge and a stronger orientation towards the institutional framework of the European Community could be stated. The Maastricht Treaty which came into force in 1993 marks the beginning of the third period. This “phase of establishment” did not developed its full strength before the beginning of the new millennium, as some of the already existing cultural projects could only be transferred to the competencies of the European Union with a certain delay of time. The formal communitarisation of the initiative at the European level and approaches towards a supranational organisation are features of this third phase. Even though the transformation of the Capital of Culture project into a community initiative was only gradually supported through higher fundings, the European Union – in this case the consensual cooperation of Council and Commission, taking the Parliament into account as well – addressed itself towards the initiative and provided it with a detailed set of rules. This third phase lasts until today; indications for significant changes in the near future are not scheduled to be expected.

In the following sections, the trial and error phase of the project shall be more closely examined: First and foremost, intergovernmental procedures of decision-making called for multiple amendments to the process. Thus, in the beginning of the 1990s, there was a widespread agreement that the growing demand from the cities – increasingly from non EC/EU-member states – and the necessity of a unanimous vote required procedural changes. The most obvious solution was found admitting the nomination of two cities per year. Moreover, non-member states which are based on the principles of democracy, pluralism and law were allowed to participate. As an additional measure, the “European Cultural Month” was originated which was supposed to open up new alternatives for cities outside the Community.<sup>23</sup>

In the following years, conflicts between the member states were reinforced. This became relevant when all member states that have been part of the founding period of the programme (1983 to 1986) had carried the title and no agreement on a new annual rotation could be agreed upon. In 1997, the Greek city Thessaloniki rang in the second

---

<sup>23</sup> Title holders: Krakow (1992), Graz (1993), Budapest (1994), Nicosia (1995), St. Petersburg (1996), Ljubljana (1997), Linz and Valletta (1998), Plovdiv (1999), Basel and Riga (2001), again St. Petersburg (2003) and Barcelona (2004).

round. Due to substantial divergences between the responsible ministers the principle of equal rotation was dropped. Instead, lobbying strategies and political interests played a more and more decisive role prior to the selection process. The nomination of Thessaloniki was seen in connection with the riots in Macedonia. When Stockholm which had prevailed against its competitor Prague was nominated in 1998, the title went to a member state that had only joined the European Union in 1995 and whose population still had to decide for the accession in a referendum. In 1999 Weimar, a city symbolising reunified Germany, prevailed against Nuremberg and Krakow.

The highly symbolic year 2000 finally messed up the system entirely. The principle that not more than two cities should carry the title at the same time – a principle that had just been resolved in 1990 – was dropped. Given the necessity of a unanimous vote and the great importance of the year 2000, the Council could not find an agreement. As a result, all nine applicants were accepted and Avignon, Bergen, Bologna, Brussels, Krakow, Helsinki, Prague, Reykjavik and Santiago di Compostela simultaneously became European Capitals of Culture. Among them were four cities which belonged to non EU-member states. As divided as the ministers were in this matter, as united they were when the decision was taken that the funds for the Capital of Culture initiative should not be substantially increased. Hence, each city received 220.000 Euro from the community funds. Nevertheless, the Capital of Culture title was often enough an apple of discord. The ministers in the Council could not manage to agree upon one single city and more than one title holder became usual. At the latest since then it could not be doubted that the project had certain mistakes and immediately called for reforms.

At the turn of the century further fields of conflicts arose: As decisions about the European Capital of Culture were primarily made “behind closed doors” – by national politicians and beyond the influence of European institutions – trouble was predestined. Permanent representatives of the member states submitted their proposals to the Culture Ministers Council which were confidentially discussed by the national ministers; often regardless of any formal criteria or evaluation schemes. It was not unusual that the applicant-cities did neither have an elaborated concept nor any financial plan. Consequently, the first survey on the development of the Capital of Culture concept from 1985 to 1994 stated: “Most of the Cities of Culture received their designation without any prepared plans or published intentions.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty opened up the opportunity for a communitarisation of cultural policy in the EC Treaty. Considering the Council’s willingness to integrate cultural

---

<sup>24</sup> John Myerscough (1994): European Cities of Culture and Cultural Months. Full Report. Study prepared for the Network of Cultural Cities of Europe, Glasgow, p. 9.

concerns more tightly into Community activities,<sup>25</sup> the European Commission pleaded for the establishment of a formal legal basis for the initiative. In this way it should be granted that the procedure was based on Community law and the European Parliament was involved into the decision-making.<sup>26</sup> As for the first time in Article 128 of the Maastricht Treaty (resp. Article 151 after the renumbering of the articles in the course of the Amsterdam Treaty) a legally binding responsibility of the European Community for culture and cultural policy was codified, the European Commission committed itself to establishing a legal act for the Capital of Culture procedure.

From this time on, the procedure was supposed to be based on Community law and the European Parliament was involved into decision-making. In June 1999, after prolonged negotiations and the intervention of the conciliation committee, Council and Parliament finally agreed upon transforming the intergovernmental selection procedure of the Capital of Culture into a “community action”, based on Article 151 of the EC Treaty. This communitarisation of the initiative can be regarded as the most important reform of the concept. Most decisive was the innovation that the Commission, which provides financial means from the Community budget, could now insist on controlling the proper use of the funds. Furthermore, the selection criteria were specified: With the revised regulations that came into force in 2006 the “European dimension” became an important criterion, fostering forms of cooperation between creative artists beyond country borders and emphasizing mutual aspects of the various European cultures. Besides, this newly developed list of criteria also mentioned the concept “city and citizens” which aims at raising the citizens’ interest towards their city and thereby strengthening a sustainable development of the city. As another novelty of the 2006 regulation a jury for monitoring and consulting was installed which exclusively consisted of experts that had been nominated by the EU. Two times, the designated Capitals of Culture had to submit progress reports to the jury.

Considering the recent reforms of the Capital of Culture initiative it becomes obvious that the campaign, which had originally been initiated by European nation states under rather loose and non-binding framework conditions, has turned into an extensive set of rules, controlling almost every detail from the application and the selection criteria, to the (pre-)selection, through to the jury and the evaluation process.

### **The change of the programme: cultural perspectives**

---

<sup>25</sup> See Entschließung des Rats vom 20. Januar 1997 über die Einbeziehung der kulturellen Aspekte in die Tätigkeit der Gemeinschaft. ABl. EG C 36/4 v. 5.2.1997.

<sup>26</sup> See ABl. EG C 362 v. 28.11.1997 und KOM(97) 549. In diesem Zusammenhang sprach sich die Kommission auch dafür aus, die Veranstaltung „Europäischer Kulturmonat“ einzustellen.

With regard to the cultural dimension of the initiative in the past 25 years, three phases of the Capital of Culture can be identified:

1) In the early years, already well known metropolises like Athens (1985), Florence (1986), Amsterdam (1987), West Berlin (1988) and Paris (1989) were nominated whose cultural significance was undisputed. In their programmes the main focus was set on projects related to high culture which were presented as parts of summer events. Thus, in Athens the classical culture of the West dominated, in Florence the idea of the renaissance was represented, Amsterdam stood for a port city through which European culture was spread all over the world and Berlin displayed itself at a crossing point of the eastern and the western world. With respect to the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French Revolution the ideas of enlightenment as well as the principles of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” were celebrated values in Paris in 1989. Against this backdrop, critics prevailed that the European Capitals of Culture are predominantly oriented at classical culture.<sup>27</sup>

2) The city of Glasgow, in contrast to former European Capitals of Culture, represented in 1990 a municipality suffering from structural change, which was not to be associated with culture at all. Glasgow stood for a new interpretation of the idea and introduced a second phase of the Capital of Culture project. The old industrial town of Glasgow did not only take the chance to show the perspectives of its industrial heritage beyond classical “high culture” but it also succeeded to restore large parts of the city. „Glasgow's miles better-campaign” considered culture as a means to reuse traditional places by converting, for example, a church into a cultural centre and thereby bringing back people into urban spaces long neglected by city sprawl. The urban renewal programme had a large variety of facets: for instance the renewal of the Victorian sandstone buildings in the city centre, the modernization of the streetcar system and the opening of the Royal Concert Hall.

Glasgow's concept had a deep impact on the initiative. By finally extending the initiative to an all-year-round programme with systematic image advertisement, by taking aspects of sustainability into account and with regard to new features of urban planning and development, Glasgow virtually revolutionized the Capital of Culture idea. Succeeded by Dublin in 1991, the idea of an all-year-round programme continued, though not in every case with as much effort and expenditure as in Glasgow. As result a quite heterogeneous period began with some cities taking up – in different variations – Glasgow's pioneer conception. In the course of this, two remarkable developments can be identified: The well established European cultural metropolises ambitiously devoted themselves to

---

<sup>27</sup> Henk Van Galen Last (1988): Reflexions on Gulliver and European Culture, in: Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch 4, pp. 493-498.

sights of high culture and to the artistic composition of their year of Culture, whereas other cities started to renovate buildings and churches or to build new theatres and concert halls. The 1990s can be characterised as a transitional phase of the Capital of Culture idea. On the one hand, cities like Dublin (1991), Madrid (1992) or Lisbon (1994) were nominated, which aimed at reinforcing and revitalising their already existing cultural opportunities and thus organised their Capital of Culture year in a rather traditional way, similar to the title holders of the first years. In particular, the established European cultural metropolises developed only little ambition. No cultural arrangements beyond the advanced culture were developed; the speaker of the organizing committee of Madrid had to admit at the end of the cultural city year 1992: "We have failed to get through to the ordinary people"<sup>28</sup>. On the other hand, cities like Antwerp (1993),<sup>29</sup> Thessaloniki (1997), Copenhagen (1996) and Stockholm (1998) were nominated, which – until being Capital of Culture – had hardly been perceived as cultural metropolises and in parts even had to fight with infrastructural problems.

The common denominator of almost all Capitals of Culture in the 1990s was the aim to improve the image of the city and to increase turnover figures and city tourism – not least against the background of the growing importance of short trips and city trips. The title of a Capital of Culture successfully attracted hundreds of thousands of tourists who again – as multipliers – attracted further visitors. Hence, the title offered an ideal way to increase public awareness and interest towards the respective cities within a more and more competitive tourism market of high sales potential. Regardless of the rather modest financial contributions of the European Community and despite the cities' massive mountains of debt the programme developed considerable effects: Subsequent to the Capital of Culture year the receipts from tourism rose by 12 percent in average, whereas the long-term image increase in prestige for a title holder can hardly be expressed in numbers.<sup>30</sup> Yet, 80 per cent of the people in former cultural capitals indicated that 'their' city has profited from the nomination.<sup>31</sup>

The more the initiative proved itself, the more the financial supports as well as the organisational efforts increased, the more these investments had to be legitimated by long-term effects e.g. economical growth, tourism increases.<sup>32</sup> By doing so, the genuine idea

---

<sup>28</sup> Irish Times 22.10.1992.

<sup>29</sup> The Times v. 7.4.1993. Cf. Eric Corijn/Sabine van Praet: Antwerp 93 in the context of European Capitals: Art Policy as Politics. A balance sheet, Brüssel o.J. [1994].

<sup>30</sup> See for details the reports of John Myerscough and Robert Palmer.

<sup>31</sup> Palmer and Rae Associates (2004), part 1:19-20, 47–50, 112; Myerscough (1994):27.

<sup>32</sup> See Kathrin Oerters (2008). Die finanzielle Dimension der europäischen Kulturhauptstadt: Von der Kulturförderung zur Förderung durch Kultur, in: Jürgen Mittag (ed.): *Die Idee der Kulturhauptstadt Europas. Anfänge, Ausgestaltung und Auswirkungen europäischer Kulturpolitik*, Essen: Klartext, pp. 97-124.

of cultural participation got lost to some extent. To an ever greater scope the cities' intention break path to put oneself on the map of future travellers while a growing numbers of tourists was considered as the key benchmark for a successful European Capital of Culture.

3) With the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a third period of the Capital of Culture concept was about to start, which can be traced back to its communitarisation. Since the adoption of the new EC-guidelines a number of alterations in the programme can be observed, as the following examples indicate. Already in 2000 when Brussels – together with eight other cities – became European Capital of Culture, participatory elements were gaining more attention. In 2004 the city of Lille used the nomination as a European Capital of Culture to induce far-reaching changes and to generate a long-term 'metamorphosis' of the city. The Palmer report described the mission statement of Lille as follows: "We dreamt of Lille as a spaceship changing the fabric of time, a place where everyone can live at their own pace, cross through exotic parallel worlds, stroll through the new frontiers opened up and already dissolved (...) a process of metamorphosis with the ability and energy to perpetually remodel the world."<sup>33</sup>

Lille intended to use the designation as European Capital of Culture as an opportunity to change the perception of the city in a national and international perspective and aimed at overcoming and transforming the structures that had shaped the city in the past. Lille 2004 was the first European Capital of Culture to expand the cultural programme geographically to the entire Nord/Pas-de-Calais region and parts of Belgium, more precisely to 193 cities, towns and villages, where nearly 2.500 cultural events took place. This was not only meant to reshape the area as a cultural space, but also to attract economic investments to the region. As this strategy proved successful, other European Capitals of Culture, such as Luxemburg in 2007 and the Ruhr in 2010, followed the concept and involved the entire region. The inclusion of the Lille region was particularly successful in terms of the involvement of locals, both residents and artists. Street festivals, workshops and meetings were only a few opportunities for local residents to participate in the programme. The entire programme was multi-faceted and designed to involve a large number of cultural producers (17,500) and to attract as many different audiences as possible. There were special projects for children or programmes taking place in socially disadvantaged areas. With its unprecedented 'ambassadors' programme the city again set an example for other European Capitals of Culture. Some 17.800 citizens voluntarily supported the European Capital of Culture as "relais d'informations", backstage, in the logis-

---

<sup>33</sup> Palmer/Rae Associates (2004), part-1: p. 48.

tics or the reception of artist during the year 2004. 200 of them became full time volunteers. The amelioration of cultural facilities for artists and residents was of particular importance. Urban development and heritage regeneration programmes led to the development of cultural infrastructures in the French as well as in the Belgian cities: twelve “maisons folie”, new and improved exhibition venues and a new sports park for freestyle skateboarding and BMX were established, the Opera house, churches and monuments were restored. The overall budget for capital infrastructure came to 70 millions Euros.<sup>34</sup> New networks were built up in the course of the cultural year with certain relevance for the spread of cultural production over the entire region, such as relations to the local organisations, transnational relations of governance institutions and partnerships with local businesses and companies. The association “Lille Horizon 2004” which was established for the European Capital of Culture-event is succeeded by the initiative “Lille 3000” still in charge of the cultural development in the Northern France region. Using the slogan the “voyage goes on” Lille 3000 aims to extend the dynamism of the European Capital of Culture-year. The association builds on the know-how of the Lille metropolitan area and also benefits from the networks established in 2004. The ambassador programme was continued within Lille 3000 as well. Lille’s counterpart in 2004, Genoa, indicates that different approaches in the configuration of the cultural year still prevail: Due to its ephemeral approach and the focus on high profile events and tourist attraction, the events turned out as a success in economic terms, but they yielded scarcely sustainable impacts.<sup>35</sup>

A more novel qualitative step was undertaken by Cork 2005: Being a rather small town, Cork activated the local population greatly to the extent that even the Irish Council of the Arts took note and has now a better appreciation of cultural resources there. Cork organised cultural actions in all sorts of places, including hospitals and jails. For poetry and translation, they developed a special system: Local residents who spoke that respective language and could act as mediator translated foreign poets. Considering these more recent developments, it seems to be adequate to assign a new quality of the programme that has been established in the last few years. In view of the new regulations of the programme and its more clear-cut criteria the different approaches of the cities have already played an important role for the selection committee.

A survey on the Economy of Culture prepared for the European Commission in 2006<sup>36</sup> identifies three “distinctive roles” of culture in local development. Culture firstly serves as

---

<sup>34</sup> Lille Metropole (2004), p. 6 ([http://iis22.domicile.fr/lille2004/v04-asp2/abc2\\_flashback.asp](http://iis22.domicile.fr/lille2004/v04-asp2/abc2_flashback.asp)).

<sup>35</sup> Sacco and Blessi (2007).

<sup>36</sup> KEA European Affairs (2006): *The Economy of Culture in Europe. Study prepared for the European Commission*, Brussels: European Commission.

an engine for tourism and therefore generates direct and indirect profits. Secondly, cultural industries produce economic benefits on a regional level. As cities form ideal places to encourage creativity and therefore to host cultural and creative industries, clustering takes place which aids cities to compete on an international level in the attraction of talents and economies. A third role of culture in urban and regional development is seen on the level of its social impacts, i.e. the capacity to integrate marginalized communities, to serve for a better social cohesion and to contribute to a better communication.<sup>37</sup> Apparently, most of the European Capitals of Culture addressed at least some of these “roles”. Summarising the historical evolution of the European Capital of Culture-initiative it can be concluded that the former festivals of art have turned into potential catalysts for transformation processes since the Glasgow experience at the latest. Accordingly, most of the subsequent European Capitals of Culture expressed high expectations on the title. The aims of the cities were manifold referring to cultural, economical or social aspects. While the cities set their own priorities within these targets the majority of cities agreed in the need to pursue a long term strategy of city development and urban regeneration. The attraction of visitors has proved as a very important issue. Yet, the improvement of the local infrastructure of cultural facilities and venues has also been addressed. Involving citizens and the local art scene by means of project calls or volunteer programmes has become common interest as well. Promoting a new image of the city was both an aim by itself and a means of other more economical targets and therefore played a significant role. Even though the set of objectives was rather alike, the implementation and leverages widely differed – given the designation of European Capitals of Culture of most different kinds. Consequently, the achievements regarding the local or regional transformation and long-term impacts vary considerably.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusions**

According to the original purpose of the initiative, the title holder was supposed to foster a vivid dialogue between the cultures of Europe, to emphasize commonalities and to respect particularities in terms of “united in diversity”. Especially the objectives “to help bring the peoples of the member states closer together” and “to promote greater mutual acquaintance between European citizens” were explicitly stressed.

In the 25 years between 1985 and 2010, the Capital of Culture project with its 42 title holders has become renowned far beyond the borders of the European continent and

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.: 145-185.

<sup>38</sup> Palmer/Rae Associates (2004): part 1: pp. 14; 47-51.

even functions as a role model in other parts of the world.<sup>39</sup> What was discussed about the 2010 Capitals of Culture with regard to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the initiative had only little in common with what had taken place in Athens in 1985, where primarily European high culture was presented. Strengthening European identity and increasing people's acceptance of European unification were the primary goals that have been pursued by the member states in the foundation phase of the Capital of Culture programme, whereas its realisation has gained a certain dynamic of its own throughout the later years, predominantly aiming at fostering city tourism and increasing the image of the title holders. Besides that, questions of urban redevelopment and renewal have become more and more relevant. In particular, by choosing a city with less pronounced cultural traditions and diverse problems resulting from industrial decline, the conception and implementation of the 1990 Capital of Culture Year in Glasgow contributed towards a growing importance of architectural and infrastructural measures.

At the same time, the initiative's references to Europe more and more faded. The reorientation of the concept in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the coupling of one West- and one East-European city indicate to have a deep impact on the perspectives of the initiative. Current studies show that the recent changes were able to strengthen both European integration and the urban development as well as the images of the cities. Accordingly, it can be assumed that future cultural capitals will rather become a platform of (cultural) innovation and European cooperation than a showcase of former achievements.

- to be continued -

---

<sup>39</sup> Since 1996 the title of an Arab Capital of Culture is awarded by the Arab League. Title holders are 1996: Kairo (Egypt), 1997: Tunis (Tunisia), 1998: Schardscha (Sharjah)(United Arab Emirates), 1999: Beirut (Lebanon), 2000: Riad (Saudi Arabia), 2001: Kuwait City (Kuwait), 2002: Amman (Jordan), 2003: Rabat (Morocco), 2004: Sana'a (Yemen), 2005: Khartum (Sudan), 2006: Maskat (Oman), 2007: Algier (Algeria), 2008: Damaskus (Syria), 2009: Jerusalem (Palestine), 2010: Doha (Qatar).

Since 2000 the title of an "American Capital of Culture" has been awarded to a city from Latin America. Title holders are 2000: Mérida (Mexiko), 2001: Iquique (Chile), 2002: Maceió (Brasilia), 2003: Panama City (Panama) und Curitiba (Brasilia), 2004: Santiago (Chile), 2005: Guadalajara (Mexico), 2006: Cordoba (Argentina), 2007: Cusco (Peru), 2008: Brasilia (Brasilia), 2009: Asuncion (Paraguay), 2010: Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic). There is also the title "Ibero American Capital of Culture" assigned by the Union of Ibero American Capitals.

Since 2003 a number of Canadian cities have been awarded as Canadian Capitals of Culture.