

Extract from the publication “European Capital of Culture” (2022)

The publication of an article by investigative journalist Uwe Ritzer in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 3 December 2020 cast the ECoC initiative in a different light. Ritzer also focused on sustainable structures – but in a completely different way. He revealed continuing connections between the selection panel, a network of consultants, and the ECoC actors; these connections cast doubt on the credibility of the title award. Essentially, Ritzer drew attention to two issues: (1) the possible bias of at least one juror in the selection of the city of Chemnitz as ECoC 2025; and (2) the lack of transparency of the initiative, which allows some consultants to conclude contracts for high fees below the radar of public awareness. The journalist’s research appears to be trustworthy and corresponds to the facts. It reveals that there are design flaws in the ECoC initiative that have resulted in “sustainable” grievances.

The competition in Germany for the ECoC title for 2025 not only produced countless “identity discourses”, “cultural policy potentials”, “municipal-regional reflections” and “new governance approaches”, but also revealed the dark side of these noble goals. Just as RUHR.2010 became the new benchmark in ECoC history in terms of its budget, its programme design and, above all, its regional scope, the German candidate cities for 2025 also wanted to set new standards. It had long since become standard practice for cities to include their regions in their programmes and also in the years of preparation and follow-up. No city would have proceeded without this regional aspect, since a larger area makes it possible to involve even more people in the project and to promote (or find) even more cultural treasures. So, naturally, little Zittau made its bid together with the regions in its two neighbouring countries. Nuremberg included the entire metropolitan region, which is larger than the federal state of Hesse. And, in Hildesheim, the whole bid was made under the title of “a European province of culture” anyway. The “capital of culture” had thus become a cultural region. Since the topic of “culture in rural areas” has long been in vogue in German cultural policy, this further development was generally welcomed. Who would have anything negative to say about the pretty rural cultural projects that gave

the cities' bids a touch of country charm, closeness to nature, originality and authenticity, in addition to their urban profile?

Over time, the inclusion of the surrounding region was added to the EU's list of criteria, as were further requirements in the area of urban development. The quantitative scope of the legal developments alone shows how much the demands have grown over the years for a city to assert itself as an ECoC against competing cities: While the first resolution of 1985 comprised only one page, the resolution has become increasingly comprehensive over time and now comprises 12 pages. The fact that the demands on the cities participating in the competition increased was generally welcomed: even more goals had become possible. Thus, over time, the ECoC initiative became a multifunctional mega-project to which the most diverse stakeholders could subscribe.

No one pointed out the price that this development brought with it: not only more money, but also more know-how became necessary. But among the euphorically proclaimed slogans of the candidate cities ("Here Now Everyone for Europe",¹ or "How Candidate Cities Can Contribute the Redesign of Europe"²) there was no room for critical voices.

Because each candidate city would be given a budget of tens of millions of Euros if they were to win the title, consultants rallied around them and offered their services, as they always do when large sums of money are involved. And since an ECoC bid is a complex and specialised matter, the expertise for which can be acquired only through personal experience, the consultants were also needed. They form a manageable group of about 30 persons who move from ECoC to ECoC and make their knowledge available. Some cynically call their business a "consulting rodeo",³ while others consider it crucial insider knowledge that can help a city to win. It is indisputable that

¹ Motto of the candidate city Hanover: see link (a).

² Title of a panel at the ECoC Conference "under construction" in Magdeburg, 22–24 March 2018: see link (b).

³ "A consulting rodeo with all its negative implications, such as recommending each other to others, and passing posts and contracts" (Kauffmann 2020).

there was a need for advice in the cities about very extensive requirements of the bidding process. Certainly, consultants can be helpful when it comes to the “view from the outside” in a demanding, year-long process that is managed by a small bid team that often has little experience of large-scale projects in a European context. But the question is whether the scale and the amount of the fees are justified. Is it justifiable – not least from an environmental point of view – to have consultants flown in from all over Europe? Was there really no one in Saxony or Germany with the appropriate expertise for Chemnitz? There is no question that some advisors are committed, stay on site, have a close connection with the cities and assist them in the long term. But there are also those who operate exclusively in the background and move from location to location, presenting their supposedly unique concepts and pressuring the cities to pay their high fees.

The shadow economy of the consultants is made possible by the lack of transparency in the processes followed in awarding the ECoC title. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* revealed in several articles in December 2020 and January 2021, several consultants in different candidate cities received six-figure sums, working for competing candidate cities at the same time and passing consulting contracts to each other. (Ritzer 2020) There were also dubious connections with the selection panel. The consultants were never based in one of the candidate cities and only in exceptional cases did they become publicly involved in the discourse. In any event, the advancement of the initiative was not a priority for them, even if this was sometimes presented differently.

Ritzer explains the entanglements of the selection jury as follows:

These conditions cannot be justified by the fact that there is only a small circle of experts who know their way around this topic. If this is indeed the case, two questions arise: Firstly, whether the professional requirements for the ECoC label are not fundamentally wrong and completely excessive, so that candidate cities are forced to buy in expensive people from outside. The second question is whether the circle of these people is deliberately kept so manageable precisely because they can then more conveniently offer each other the contracts. (Ritzer 2021: 4)

The financial aspect of this “consultant-gate” alone is a scandal: While competitions were held in the bidding process in which artists and cultural workers could win the symbolic sum of 2025 Euros (appropriate for the ECoC year 2025), consultants received multiples of this sum. Cities could decorate themselves outwardly using the micro-financing provided for colourful, sympathetic cultural projects, and the cultural scene was supposed to be happy about the small gifts received from the bidding team. What was not communicated to the outside world, however, was that, behind closed doors, consultants sometimes received fees that were more than 50 times as high.⁴

In addition to the disclosure of the consultancy deals, the conflicts of interest of a member of the ECoC selection jury were also revealed. One juror is the CEO of a cultural centre listed as a cooperation project in Chemnitz’ bid book.⁵ Thus, by voting for Chemnitz, the juror directly benefited from his own decision.

The political handling of a suspected conflict of interest

This alleged bias became known in December 2020, i.e. only a few weeks after the European selection panel’s designation of Chemnitz on 28 October 2020. At that time, however, the formal designation by the Federal Republic of Germany, represented by the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz or “KMK”), was still pending. A troubling situation now ensued: several politicians raised their concerns, first and foremost the Bavarian Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs, Bernd Sibler, who was chairing the Conference of Ministers of Culture at the time. But he was immediately silenced by various media: the Bavarians were labelled “sore losers” because they had thought they would win with Nuremberg. But who else but the defeated candidate cities could have made a qualified statement on this matter? After nine months of Covid, the cultural sector had enough to do simply trying to survive, so it could not address the complex matter of the ECoC bidding process. Consequently, only those who were themselves involved in the matter, i.e. the candidate cities, were well versed in it.

⁴ See Ritzer 2020.

⁵ See link (c).

Sibler's complaint led to the KMK's decision being postponed so that they could investigate the accusations of bias. This was already seen as a scandal because never before had an ECoC not been confirmed by the competent national bodies after being nominated by the selection panel.

At the beginning of 2021, the chairmanship of the KMK moved from Bernd Sibler to Berlin's Senator for Culture, Klaus Lederer. Under his chairmanship, the KMK confirmed the appointment of Chemnitz on 11 January 2021. Another option was probably not conceivable, because the selection procedure does not provide for a replacement. Thus, another candidate city could not have easily taken Chemnitz' place, and, furthermore, such a move might have led to the politically unwelcome East–West debate. The KMK succinctly stated that, at the meeting, “important questions raised in the media in connection with the selection of the European Capital of Culture 2025 [were] clarified”.⁶ However, what was clarified, and how, remains a secret to this day.

The chairperson of the jury was not available to answer questions from the media and academia. The European Commission (EC) only gave vague rather than concrete answers to the reasonable questions about how the accusations of bias against the juror in question could be cleared up. Enquiries to the KMK and individual culture ministers repeatedly referred to the KMK's enigmatic press release and explained that the meeting was “confidential”. Accordingly, no minutes of the meeting were released.

This raises pressing questions about both the proportionality and the appropriateness of the failure to communicate and the citizens' right to access information under the Freedom of Information Act. After all, this was not an explosive intelligence operation, but a cultural competition. Questions about the outcome of a multi-million project using taxpayers' money cannot be classified as confidential in this case, but must be addressed in a completely transparent manner. In this respect, the reactions of some leading journalists were justified: the political procedure was labelled a “tour de force

⁶ See link (d).

in terms of backroom mentality” (Hansen 2020), where “morals [...] seem to have been left a bit behind on the way of Chemnitz as European Capital of Culture 2025”.⁷

There were also talks between the EC and the chairperson of the European Parliament’s Culture Committee on the allegations in question. Here, too, those responsible could only unanimously claim that the allegations had been adequately addressed. Not even the European Parliament, whose duty it is to control the executive, has commented on the lack of transparency in the allocation of millions of Euros of taxpayers’ money.

The handling of the accusation of bias against a member of the selection panel is a political scandal that has caused lasting damage to the ECoC initiative. It is unclear whether the selection panel simply overlooked the involvement of a juror in part of the candidate city’s bid book or deliberately kept quiet about it. Neither possibility casts a good light on the renowned cultural experts who are entrusted with awarding titles with far-reaching consequences for cities and regions. After the publication of the accusations, there should at least have been a public reaction from the EU side, i.e. from the selection panel or the responsible office in the EC. This would have been a good opportunity to counter the accusation of lack of transparency in the selection process (even though overdue). Their silence, however, reinforces the suspicion that there were conflicts of interest in the awarding of the ECoC title – and perhaps not only in Chemnitz.

The costly activities of a few advisors in the background and the silence about critical aspects of the award process are the climax of a continuing lack of transparency, and have led to the fall of idealistic, noble goals. One of the design flaws of the initiative is that there are no waiting periods when stakeholders wish to take on a different role, for example, when former jurors become consultants, as is the case in the business world when similarly high sums are involved. So far, smooth transitions between activities as a juror, advisor and cultural manager or even working in these positions

⁷ See link (e).

at the same time have been a kind of normal state of affairs, so that no one has objected.

Open questions

Basically, the question is how to ensure transparency in the ECoC selection process. What exactly are the selection criteria for the jurors? Who verifies the independence and integrity of the jurors? What happens in the case of irregularities? The current regulations only specify the composition of the selection panel⁸ – but not what the selection of the jurors is based on and who assesses the panel and, if necessary, intervenes if irregularities occur.

It is also incomprehensible why the city visits that the German candidate cities presented for the final selection in October 2020, which took place completely online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, are being kept under wraps. After all, they were financed with hundreds of thousands of Euros that come almost exclusively from the public purse. The digital city visits do not contain state secrets, but merely summarise the bids of the respective cities in video format. What is so strictly confidential about a video in which a city presents its cultural capital and potential?

It must also be asked why the names of the jury members are announced at short notice before the title is awarded and why there is no provision in principle for the jurors to be available for interviews. Last, but not least, the public has a right to know exactly how the allegations of conflicts of interest in the awarding of the title to Chemnitz were addressed. And finally: What concrete consequences have resulted or will result from the allegations of bias and lack of transparency against the ECoC initiative that have been discussed since December 2020?

⁸ The independent European selection panel is formally composed as follows: The European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament each appoint three members for three years. The European Committee of the Regions, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Federal Government (the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the Federal Foreign Office) each appoint one jury member. See Decision No 445/2014/EU, Art. 6: link (f).

When asked, the EC stated that the juror in question had left the selection panel “for professional reasons”. There was no press release about this change. The names of the jury members do not appear on the EC website;⁹ on request, one learns that they can be found in a selection report. Calls for more transparency have so far been ignored. In February 2021, the German KMK approached the responsible EU Commissioner for Culture, Marija Gabriel, and called for a review of the EU competition framework, including transparency and compliance regulations. In November 2021, the topic was on the agenda of the European Parliament’s Culture Committee. But answers to the critical questions from the EC were awaited in vain.

Misguided developments of the original idea

Only a few years ago, there were calls for the EU’s bid book criteria to demand more from cities. (see Jacobsen 2009: 47) But now a kind of cobra effect¹⁰ has occurred. The catalogue of criteria has become so demanding that smaller cities no longer have the opportunity to participate in the competition on their own – unless they allow themselves to be coached by external consultants. Even Chemnitz, which is not really small and does not lack experience with international cooperation projects, spent about 650,000 Euros on external consultants, according to information it made available. But does this still correspond to the original idea of the ECoC, if a small group of ECoC consultants moves from city to city, offering their “off-the-shelf originality”?¹¹

⁹ See link (g).

¹⁰ “A perverse incentive is an incentive that has an unintended and undesirable result that is contrary to the intentions of its designers. The cobra effect is the most direct kind of perverse incentive, typically because the incentive unintentionally rewards people for making the issue worse.” See link (h).

¹¹ See the illustration in the bid book of the candidate city Hanover: “And then a consultant from an agency comes to see you and tells you that the deadline for bids for the title of European Capital of Culture 2025 is fast approaching. A very, very important deadline, he says. But you needn’t worry. He’s already written lots of Bid Books for various cities and he knows exactly what to do. He shows you the work he’s done over the past few years: dozens of bids, all highly original and attractively presented. His agency, he says, offers nothing less than a bespoke, engaging bid proposal featuring all the right buzzwords, with a catchy motto that will make a big impression on the jury. The previous examples he shows you talk about ›open spaces‹, ›open minds‹ and ›frameworks‹, about ›empowerment‹ and ›urban labs‹. And pretty much all the cities, you notice, are located ›at the heart of Europe‹ and are hubs of communication and cultural exchange. The consultant stands beside you, nods, and finally names a price for his art. Is this what people want? Ready-made originality? Doesn’t this rob every word of its utopian potential? You ask yourself: doesn’t a bid written in 2019 need to strike a completely different tone from one written five years ago, after all that has happened? Doesn’t it need to respond directly to the cultural and political realities of our continent, to the rift running through

The ECoC initiative is now out of kilter. It is a toxic spiral in which cities are under pressure to make their ECoC programme more and more extensive in terms of content, as well as space, time and, ultimately, finances. When the small candidate city of Zittau (just under 30,000 inhabitants) listed its Christmas market as a cultural event in the cultural calendar on its homepage, some people simply laughed at the city. This was out of line with the styled, hyper-innovative self-portrayals of the other candidate cities that are standard today.

The fact that cities with less money are *de facto* excluded from the competition contradicts the basic principles of the ECoC initiative. An example of this is the “SECOC” (Shaping European Capitals of Culture) workshop held in Wrocław in October 2018.¹² Participation in the seminar, which was again offered by representatives of the same circle of consultants, cost 1,550 Euros per participant (including accommodation and meals). Some candidate cities were unable or unwilling to pay this sum and therefore did not send any representatives to the seminar. However, not only did they miss out on practical information for their bid books, but also on crucial connections to the masterminds of the initiative. One of these masterminds was the consultant who finally coached Chemnitz, but who had previously appeared in the candidate city of Nuremberg, together with a member of the selection panel, to offer his services, thus completely blurring the boundaries between consultants and jurors. (see Ritzer 2020)

Another of SECOC’s workshop leaders was one of the officials responsible for ECoCs in the EC. The question is why an EC official is acting as an advisor at a seminar whose participation fee is so high that some candidate cities simply cannot afford to attend. Wouldn’t it make much more sense for the EC, for its part, to offer qualification

Europe? Shouldn’t it be about the genuine – and now so urgently necessary – coming together of people as equals?” (Hannover2025: 2)

György Konrád, a former member of the selection jury, describes the role of the consultants in a similar way: “What can you use to make a city fashionable? A city fashion designer is contracted for a lot of money. The master comes for a year, finds the local obsessives and their regular places. As a dreamy vociferous advertising expert, he guesses what will sell” (quoted in Mak 2020: 364, translated by the author).

¹² See link (i).

seminars where no city is excluded for financial reasons? The EC did launch a capacity building programme for this purpose in 2019, but this programme applies only to designated ECoCs (not candidate cities); furthermore, it was thwarted by the Covid-19 pandemic and its continuation is unclear. However, it would be better for the competing cities if the EC offered support during the bidding process, i.e. before the title is awarded. But if ECoC experts are involved in the offering of support, it is important to ensure that they are impartial and do not hold any other positions in the ECoC carousel that may give them access to confidential information from individual bidding cities.

The designation of Chemnitz2025

The ECoC title was hastily awarded to Chemnitz, apparently because of pragmatic considerations. However, the title should not be awarded by a jury with potential conflicts of interest. No one knows how the accusations of bias were addressed. The ECoC Chemnitz2025 would also be on a much sounder footing if the accusations had been properly addressed and the findings communicated to the public. Now the bitter aftertaste of a possibly unfair competition procedure remains.

It cannot be denied that the selection panel allowed a political reason to emerge in the reasons for its selection in the two selection rounds. For example, the elimination of Dresden as a candidate city was justified as follows: “The need for the ECoC title and its legacy was not clearly articulated.”¹³ This raises the suspicion that the selection panel followed the mood of some media¹⁴ during the bidding process, such as the German Cultural Council (Deutscher Kulturrat 2019: 14) and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Heidtmann & Nimz 2019), which contrasted the two Saxon competing cities in a questionably simplistic way: poor Chemnitz, which has a problematic reputation, versus dazzling, privileged Dresden. This is reminiscent of the selection of the ECoC Marseille-Provence 2013, in whose final round the selection panel’s decision for Marseille and against Bordeaux is said to have been “because Marseille deserves it”.

¹³ The Expert Panel’s report Pre-Selection Stage, Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2025 in Germany, p. 10: see link (j).

¹⁴ See the author’s assessment in Prante 2020: 22.

Afterwards it was widely stated that pity was truly not a legitimate selection criterion and that the jurors should instead strictly adhere to the established criteria.

Ulrich Fuchs, who conducted several workshops with the candidate cities on behalf of the *Cultural Foundation of the Federal States* (Kulturstiftung der Länder) as managing authority, comments as follows on the question of whether there was an “Eastern bonus”: “But only if the bid from Chemnitz or Magdeburg is just as good as one from the three West German cities. Then it could also count that one says: Well, the last ECoC was in Western Germany with Essen and the Ruhr area, maybe the next one will be in Eastern Germany.” (quoted in Reiche 2020) Whether Dresden really dropped out of the competition at an early stage against the background of this simplistic black-and-white portrayal in the media cannot be proven. In any event, many did not understand the selection panel’s assessment.

No one wants to take the ECoC title away from Chemnitz. Most are certainly in favour of the approach in the bid book to become a “model for Europe” by seeking dialogue with right-wing elements through artistic encounters and new, innovative formats. The need for this became again alarmingly clear during the digital ECoC title ceremony on 28 October 2020, when citizens of Chemnitz even chanted right-wing slogans in live chat during the panel chairwoman’s announcement speech. Apart from the conflict of interest, the city has delivered a good bid and will hopefully use its ECoC budget of 90 million Euros for many good innovations and formats in the cultural sector. But good governance structures also require sound management that stands up to public scrutiny in every respect.

Cultural policy consequences for the future

The transparency and compliance deficits that have emerged have damaged the ECoC initiative and disappointed many of the actors. Now it is important to see the crisis as an opportunity to work through the points of criticism and use them constructively for a reorientation of the initiative. “We need a renewal of content, more transparency, more quality control. And perhaps completely new formats”

summarised Gottfried Wanger, former member of the selection panel, after the accusations about the designation of Chemnitz.¹⁵

In general, the Covid-19 pandemic means that many aspects of the cultural sector need to be readjusted and renegotiated. At the political level, there must be more transparency and checks and balances through binding compliance rules.

In any event, the selection panel must be accessible to the public. The question is to what extent the programme as a whole needs to be scaled down in order to remain authentic. Here, one could consider limiting the budgets for the bidding process or even the opening ceremonies of the cities, which are sometimes excessive in terms of the money spent. The current catalogue of criteria is also far too extensive for smaller cities. It should be reduced, as should the scope of the bid books, which leads to redundancy and an unmanageable “projectitis”.

It would be beneficial if there were support structures available for those cities that have at least reached the final round. It is true that the German candidate cities for ECoC 2025 unanimously emphasise – despite all the criticism of the selection procedure – that they have grown through the competition. They have learnt a lot in terms of international cooperation, the acquisition of funding, and generally looking beyond their own borders. No other judgement would be expected, though, because after all, considerable municipal funds were invested in the bid and one would like to avoid this being seen by the citizens as a bad investment without results. The city of Nuremberg alone spent over 6.5 million Euros on its bid.¹⁶ The value of participating in the ECoC competition can only be assessed in a few years. But especially due to the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the associated cuts in the cultural sector, there is a danger that the opportunities gained will be lost again. In Italy, each candidate city received 1 million Euros for the implementation of its Plan B. In Germany, the federal government does not offer such financial support. The EU should support such agreements, or could itself also financially support the finalists.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ruf 2020.

¹⁶ See link (k).

The “consultant-gate” revealed that it is good for the participating cities to trust in their local potential. By reflecting on the capacity in their surroundings, the local self-confidence of the city and the region is promoted – and a lot of CO² is saved.

The meetings of the so-called ECoC Family, i.e. those responsible for past, present and future ECoCs, should no longer take place behind closed doors. Process observers, for example, from academia, should be allowed to attend such meetings. Likewise, process observers should also be allowed to participate in the qualification seminars of the “managing authority”.

The German candidate cities would have liked more specific feedback on their years of preparatory work and were dissatisfied with the lack of detail in the jury reports. More in-depth explanations, for example, in conversational form, would improve the imbalance between the complex bidding process and the very brief reasons for the judgement.

No goal has been idealistic enough for the ECoCs of recent years. “What can Europe learn from us, and what can we learn from Europe? How do we want to live together in the future? What can we do better to implement the ideals of Europe?” are the standard questions repeatedly addressed at the relevant ECoC panels. Fundamental values such as identity, solidarity and humanity must be strengthened through participation in the ECoC programme. Through artistic interventions, reflections on the current, comprehensive tasks in Europe such as climate change, migration, social division, the rural exodus and many more must be stimulated; “no goal was too ambitious”. (Mak 2020: 365) Often this is formulated in such general terms that no one can disagree. That is all well and good. But in taking such a moral high ground, the ECoC programme itself must also act with integrity.

Cronyism and lack of transparency contradict the noble goals of the initiative. The emotionally charged claims of a Europe united in diversity were misused as a smokescreen and concealed questionable business relationships existing in the background. By making the ECoC objectives so consensual, critics could be silenced.

Thus, the credibility of the laudable programme is in danger. But art and culture in particular should offer an unquestionable morality in times of social reorganisation.

The ECoC initiative comprises far more than the jury caught up in conflicts of interest, “a roving group that had been informed and courted by the rival cities and had developed very specific, clearly discernible preferences and sensitivities over the years” and “an equally international itinerant group of experts and copywriters who knew exactly what the jury wanted to see and hear and advised the candidate cities in return for generous fees” (Mak 2020: 365). The ECoC initiative above all comprises many committed citizens in the participating cities who put their heart and soul into a fruitful European peace and culture project. In order for the cultural sector to continue to be a moral authority that creates touching moments in our thoroughly rationalised world, and that, contrary to all moves towards isolation, re-nationalisation and homogenisation, focuses on what unites us and on our peaceful diversity in Europe, the ECoC initiative needs a solid and unassailable foundation.

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Links

(a) <https://www.hannover.de/Kulturhauptstadt-Hannover/Aktuelles/HIER-JETZT-ALLE-f%C3%BCr-Europa>

(b) <https://www.magdeburg2030.de/veranstaltungen/detail/news/ecoc-konferenz-under-construction-bewerberstaedte-zur-kulturhauptstadt-2025-treffen-sich-in-magdeburg/>

(c) <https://chemnitz2025.de/bidbook/>

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- (k) <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/kultur/auch-ohne-titel-nuernberg-fuehrt-kulturhauptstadt-projekte-weiter,SOY1is7>