



2021/22 European Capital of Culture: Inclusive Culture-Led Branding of Novi Sad?

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1 Introduction

At the core of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) concept, promoted by the European Commission, is the objective of reaching, supporting and strengthening cultural diversity. This feature is, therefore, used as an instrument to engage citizens and boost civic pride through cultural events organised in one or several selected cities, demonstrating shared European identity (EC, 2018a). Many scholars also emphasise equally important objectives which tackle the relationship between culture and the long-term development of cities (EC, 2018a) directed towards reaching desired competitive advantages (Richards, 2000; García, 2004; Griffiths, 2006; Klaic, 2010; Boland, 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that local governments across Europe have eagerly embraced the ECoC title as a tool for regenerating, rebranding and repositioning themselves in cultural and economic terms, especially after 1990 and the Glasgow experience (O'Callaghan, 2012). Since place branding incorporates different spatial levels, while simultaneously communicating a set of information symbolically associated with a city, it is considered to be both an

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extensive governmental strategy for achieving economic development and a flexible tool of urban policy (Pasquinelli, 2010).

The attractiveness of a place, tied to a renewed and upgraded image, has often been considered as a key element of global/regional competitiveness (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2007; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010; Ashworth, 2011; Hankinson, 2010). In particular, Mommaas (2004) links urban branding strategies to spatial identity and symbolic values created by creative clusters. He emphasises their role in stimulating artistic and cultural growth and renewal in the global context, shaped by the interaction between culture and economy. However, the purposes of spatial development often prevailed the initial goals of cultural and artistic production and expression (Zukin, 1991). Consequently, investing in cultural infrastructure projects became a common practice among the ECoCs, which also allowed them to improve the quality of public spaces by refurbishments and the restoration of facilities and monuments, as well as through new cultural buildings (e.g., Pécs in 2010, Guimarães in 2012 or Košice in 2013) (Palmer-Rae Associates, 2004; EC, 2018b). Furthermore, the general objectives targeting the increased access and participation to culture, the capacity of the cultural sector and its links to other sectors (EC, 2018a) clearly define the ECoC initiative as a strategic instrument for both urban branding and development. As a result, all these steps should influence the remake of cities through culture, representing a tool for boosting urban image, attract tourism and investments (Richards & Wilson, 2004; Dogan & Sirkeci, 2013) while fostering both economic development and social inclusion through culture (García & Cox, 2013).

Although the ECoC title is generally perceived as a manifestation of creativity within urban governance, a number of scholars point out conflictual processes and problems related to social inclusion, revealing dissonances stemming from the policy framework, which might not be based on the principles of social, economic or environmental sustainability (Boland, 2011; Campbell, 2011; O'Callaghan, 2012). Therefore, the role of other stakeholders in urban/place branding is also important (Kavaratzis, 2012; Zenker & Beckmann 2013; Ye & Björner, 2018), especially regarding the role of cultural events as the instruments of participative governance and brand co-creation (Lucarelli, 2018, 2019). Consequently, the elaborated interaction between urban planning, branding and involved stakeholders (residents, the public and the private sector, grassroots initiatives etc.) is recognised as an important condition for the sustainability and success of the newly established urban brand (Braun et al., 2013; Vallaster et al., 2018). The sensitivity of this relationship was especially visible in the case of Maribor (2012), when the bottom-up initiatives challenged the regime and neoliberal system in the city (Žilič-Fišer & Erjavec, 2017). However, some authors criticise a possible politicisation of the ECoC-driven strategies (Richards, 2000; Boland, 2011; Žilič-Fišer & Erjavec, 2017), arguing that the relationship between relevant policy documents and their role in creative industries is sometimes difficult to prove (Campbell, 2011). This issue could be even more prominent in the disadvantaged urban contexts, which rely on the international outreach of the ECoC initiative in order to rebrand themselves, overcome

marginality and solve some inherited urban problems (Adams, 2008; Tölle, 2013, 2016).

The ‘latecomer’ cities of Central and East Europe, labelled as post-communist, post-socialist or transformation/transition cities, had to face greater challenges. In order to adapt to both the conditions of democratic market economy and the globalising world, they also used the ECoC programme to facilitate the transition to EU cultural and extra-cultural regulatory standards (Lähdesmäki, 2014). Furthermore, they had to deal with the adaptation of national planning systems to ‘European’ standards, often without actually integrating ‘European’ planning tools (Adams, 2008; Tölle, 2013).

The City of Novi Sad, which is the focus of this chapter as one of the 2022 ECoCs, represents a specific example as the only non-EU city winning the bid for the 2021 ECoC title (the other two from the EU—Elefsina and Timisoara—are postponed to 2023). However, due to the global pandemic, the process of implementation was prolonged causing new challenges and inconsistencies of planned transformations. Therefore, the case of Novi Sad reveals a specific transitioning context influenced by both local and global drawbacks. Generating opportunities by promoting inclusion and post-conflict reconciliation after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the civil wars in the region, the fragile local setting also provides an insight into the use of the ECoC title as a tool for culture-led urban (re)branding, identifying the modes of its integration into the local cultural strategy and urban development plans.

2 Materials and Methods

The methodological framework relies on the case study analysis. The primary data was collected through five structured and semi-structured interviews with representatives of the key bodies relevant for the ECoC initiative and other professionals from the cultural sector of Novi Sad—all conducted in March 2021 (Appendix). Additionally, valuable information was collected during the public panel discussions called *divan* (Novi Sad, 2022 on YouTube), organised by Novi Sad 2021 Foundation in order to foster the community-based participatory approach (22 August to 05 September 2018). The aim was to involve the citizens in open conversations on current topics and events during the event preparation through a two-way communication between the professionals and the general public regarding the cultural activities in Novi Sad (e.g., participatory arrangement of public areas, independent cultural centres, interpretation of cultural heritage etc.). Three sessions included up to 30–45 different stakeholders (tenants, artists, citizens, professionals etc.) who discussed the implementation and the possible effects of big-scale cultural infrastructure projects. As a result of *divans*, the mayor of Novi Sad issued a five-point statement, initiating the transformation of a specific ex-industrial area into the Creative District.

The secondary data were gathered from the Bid Book (Novi Sad, 2016, 2021), two annual reports of the ECoC Expert Panel (ECoC Expert Panel, 2018), the Monitoring panel (EC, 2017) and all available planning documents produced by the

City of Novi Sad related to cultural and urban development: the Strategy for Sustainable Development 2016–2020 (City of Novi Sad, 2016a), the Cultural Strategy of Novi Sad 2016–2026 (City of Novi Sad, 2016b) and the Action Plan 2017–2018 (City of Novi Sad, 2017).

3 Novi Sad: Becoming the ECoC 2021/2

Since its establishment in 1985, the ECoC programme had been exclusively focused on the EU member states until the importance of the initiative for ‘strengthening local and regional identity and fostering European integration’ (European Parliament & Council of the EU, 1999) was recognised. Consequently, the cities of the EU candidate countries and the potential candidates or members of the EFTA/EEA (European Free Trade Association/European Economic Area) gained the right to enter the competition every third year. This finally allowed the City of Novi Sad (Fig. 1) to submit its candidacy for the ECoC 2021. Characterised by the numerous contextual specificities generated by its post-industrial, post-socialist, post-conflict

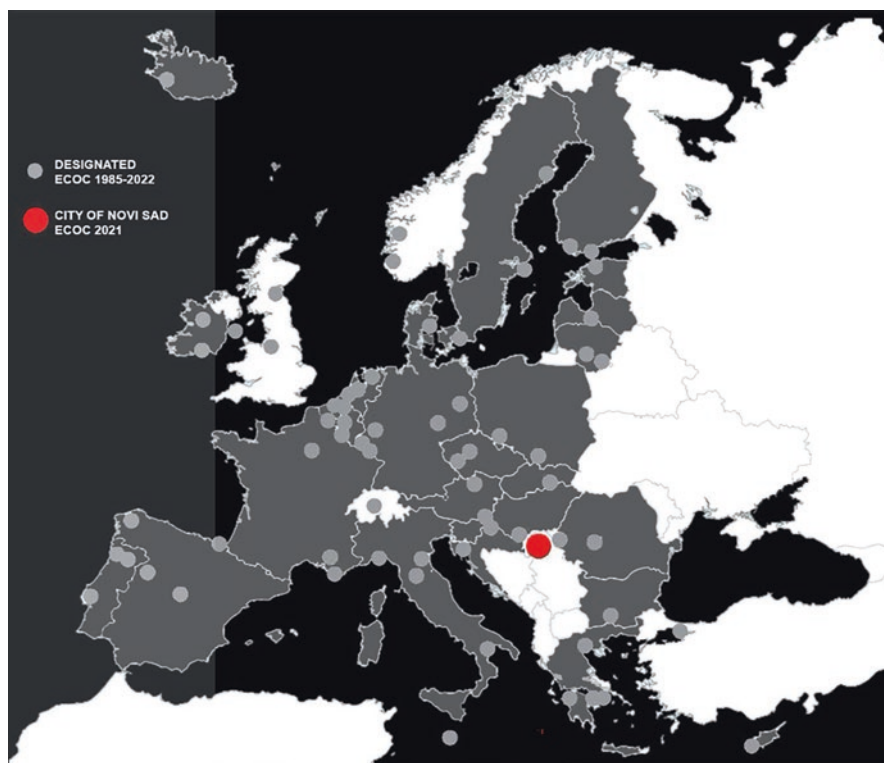


Fig. 1 The position of Novi Sad ECoC 2021/2 in the network of previous European Capitals of Culture. Author's representation

and long transitioning realities, the ECoC initiative has been seen as a convenient tool to regenerate, rebrand and reposition the second largest city in Serbia.

3.1 The Setting

During the bid process, Novi Sad used its administrative, cultural and historical features as the main advantages (Interview A1). This medium-size Central European city on the trans-European Danube River is also the capital of the Province of Vojvodina. It is the seat of several scientific and cultural institutions of both national and regional importance—including the second most important university in Serbia and the Serbian Society of Literature, Culture and Science ‘Matica Srpska’, which was moved from Budapest in 1864, when Novi Sad represented one of the most nationally diverse cities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

After the Second World War, the city became a new regional capital in socialist Yugoslavia, and its cultural profile was further enriched by the professional cultural institutions of its minority groups. However, following the collapse of the federal state and its sociopolitical establishment during the early 1990s, the rapid neoliberal development triggered the city’s comprehensive and often uncontrolled transformations threatening to jeopardise its historical identity (Polić & Stupar, 2015). Equally challenging were dynamic migratory patterns—especially after the Second World War and during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, resulting in rapid population increase and diversification. Resulting from transitioning requirements and challenges, it became necessary not only to establish new, comprehensive and effective development strategies and urban policies but also to refresh city’s identity and newly interpret its cultural plurality. Consequently, the ECoC candidacy created an opportunity to reflect on and address some critical urban issues of ethnically diverse Novi Sad. Supported by the political will to facilitate the EU integration of Serbia, the decision for the candidacy was officially announced in 2011, followed by the establishment of the Organisational Board and the Artistic Council (City of Novi Sad, 2012).

After several revisions of the Bid Book submitted in 2015, the city won the prestigious ECoC title the following year.

3.2 The Strategic Approach

The ECoC application of Novi Sad was based on two important documents: the Strategy for Sustainable Development 2016–2020 (City of Novi Sad, 2016a) and the Cultural Strategy of Novi Sad 2016–2026 (City of Novi Sad, 2016b). Both strategic documents were adopted during the process of and in accordance with the bid preparation, simultaneously representing the first long-term cultural planning in national frameworks. The main idea behind the cultural programme proposed by the Bid Book was to motivate both cultural workers and citizens to define new goals towards democratic cultural development of the city, along with the establishment

of a modern urban identity, revitalisation of cultural heritage, (re)activation of public spaces and the development of civic cultural participation. The initial logo of the Foundation additionally illustrates the main objectives of the concept and its integration within the overall urban brand—it consisted of both Cyrillic and Latin letters in crosswords, showing the multi-ethnic and multicultural features of Novi Sad. However, with the subsequent replacement of the logo with the new visual identity, inclusion and diversity no longer played the central role in the overall concept (Fig. 2).

The Bid Book was at first designed around the symbolic theme of new bridges, creating many possibilities for effective urban (re)branding [Interview A1]. This concept included four sub-themes corresponding with different European values: the Rainbow Bridge dedicated to reconciliation and migration; the New Way Bridge symbolising heritage and hospitality, spanning the past and the present; the Freedom Bridge marking creative industries and the youth sector; and the Hope Bridge emphasising cultural capacities and public spaces. The proposed concept not only refers to the historic bridges over the Danube destroyed by the 1999 NATO bombing but also jointly aims at re-establishing broken links within the local community and its numerous groups, as well as with other cities in the region and Europe (The Selection Panel, 2016). Aside from the intangible cultural values, the Bid Book provided the list of cultural infrastructure and its tangible, spatial manifestations. They were classified according to their size and expected impacts as L (large scale), M (medium scale) and S (small scale) (Fig. 3) and were considered as the new elements/nodes in the urban space for the conceived (re)branding of the city.

One of the most important L projects is the new Musical and Ballet High School with a concert hall (Fig. 3: 1.2), already shortlisted in the Strategy of Sustainable Development. These two institutions lost their previous premises during the process of property restitution in the Republic of Serbia and needed an urgent solution. The idea of a joint building was formalised by the Strategy of Sustainable Development 2016–2026, as a high priority in the local political agenda. Its construction had strategically commenced in a residential area on the outskirts of the city centre before winning the ECoC title (Fig. 4). Although being a flagship project for redeveloping and rebranding a mono-functional residential urban neighbourhood through culture, the general lack of elements contributing to the economic, social or ecological sustainability of its imminent urban environment initiated wide criticism of this project.

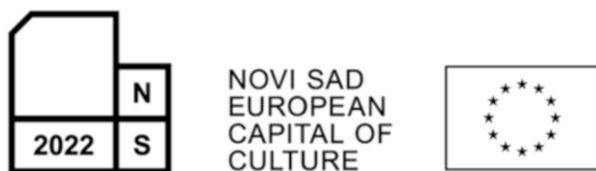


Fig. 2 The official logo of the Foundation. Source: <https://novisad2021.rs/en>



Fig. 3 The areas targeted by the ECOC programme. Authors’ representation

Another L-size project is the transformation of an abandoned metal factory compound into the Creative District, marking the shift from industrial to cultural production. During the 1990s, this area was exposed to the effects of the general economic and industrial decline of the country. Consequently, some abandoned industrial buildings were rented as warehouses by Chinese merchants, and the whole area was locally known as the Chinese quarter. Consisting of more than 15 old halls and warehouses built from 1922 to the late 1960s (Fig. 3), it was in an extremely bad condition. However, due to its favourable position on the outskirts of the city centre, by the riverbank and in the vicinity of the university zone, the



Fig. 4 Musical and Ballet high school in Novi Sad. Author's photo, 2021

opportunity for rebranding the area as a creative district with a small-scale artistic community and original production was included in the Bid Book as the future Youth Creative Polis (Fig. 5). Beside the newly introduced features that marked the shift towards a creative neighbourhood (e.g. visual and performing arts studios, museum, theatre, concert venues and old crafts), the environmental dimension of the new brand was equally important. In addition, the project equally promoted sustainability as an integral element of the urban rebranding efforts, skilfully embedded in only a few spatial interventions that not only retained the old industrial halls but also included almost all already existing cultural production of the area.

The third example of the large-scale projects represented a new cycling and pedestrian bridge across the Danube River. Highlighting the elements of a 'green' design, the awarded competition project envisioned a structure on the natural and cross-cultural corridor of the Danube River. Previously mentioned in the Sustainable Development Strategy, the bridge was later included in the Bid Book, promoting environmental awareness and the traditional local modes of mobility—cycling and walking. However, it was excluded from the list of the announced projects in 2017, due to the procedural and management problems on the city level.

The most important initiative related to the M-size projects is the flagship concept of the so-called Cultural Stations. These new nodes are supposed to include various intangible features associated with the distinctive characteristics of local communities—for example, public awareness, cultural specificity or general motivation. The Stations were described in the Bid Book as important focal points, raising local cultural recognition by strengthening the existing creative capacities of local communities.



Fig. 5 The Youth Cultural Station in the Creative District. Author's photo, 2020

Within the S group, the Bid Book proposed the project New Places—46 Urban Pockets, particularly emphasising an inclusive component of the new urban brand. By fostering transformation of small public spaces as new urban and neighbourhood toponyms, it stimulated equal involvement of both citizens and artists simultaneously serving as an anticipated platform for participation. Consequently, three cycles of citizens' involvement were organised in 12 different neighbourhoods in the period between 2017 and 2019. This process resulted in the mapping of needs and values related to the residents' closest urban surroundings, providing an insight into the local expectations regarding the ECoC project.

Finally, the Bid Book also introduced an alternative approach to the rebranding of urban spaces, where the city was used as a stage for brand promotion. Several flagship programmes were proposed—for example, *Moba* and The Peace Chapel. The concept of *Moba* was based on the idea of a participatory programme, which highlights volunteering actions of solidarity focusing on the maintenance of public spaces and emphasising the issues of heritage and education. For example, *Moba* for Heritage introduces the idea of renovating old traditional houses (i.e. the active role of space), representing a German, a Hungarian, a Slovak, a Romanian and a Serbian house as an act of enhancing social cohesion and intercultural cooperation that should contribute to the future social and economic sustainability (Novi Sad 2021, 2016, part 2, 3). However, although this initiative has apparent strongholds in tolerance and inter-culturalism, some authors underline the lack of emphasis on

creating the platforms for dialogue and shared heritage (Tomka & Kisić, 2018). The project Peace Chapel similarly uses urban space as a convenient setting while aiming at establishing an active dialogue on the future of the EU. It represents a public event reaching out to an international audience, simultaneously targeting the general ECoC objective of raising the international profile of the city through culture and cultural production.

All the highlighted examples demonstrate the important role of urban spaces acting as a stage for a number of thematic events that the Bid Book envisaged. Additionally, these projects and events aim at fostering the intangible values of international exchange and cooperation, reconciliation, collective memory and (inter)cultural legacy. The Bid Book also emphasises the importance of inclusive and participative processes in bringing into focus identity features and local qualities. The proposed programmes therefore aim at (re)creating place identity through images and narratives based on European, national and local history, integrating place branding strategy, stakeholders (especially the local community) and urban policy.

3.3 Towards Inclusion Through Participation and Co-creation

The ECoC framework particularly stresses the importance of the ‘City and Citizens’ criterion, which promotes accessibility to all citizens while simultaneously acting as an important tool of co-creative branding process (Nemeth, 2009). Resulting from this, bottom-up initiatives and social involvement are encouraged, as a way of strengthening the notion of shared ownership and communality. An example of these activities is Novi Sad are the Cultural Stations, especially the one called *Svilara*, established in October 2018 in an old silk factory, and the Youth Cultural Station (Fig. 5), established in a hall of the Creative District.

The Creative District, as the main infrastructural project of the Novi Sad ECoC 2021/22 and a testimony to its industrial past, demonstrates the concept of co-creation (Lucarelli, 2018, 2019), which was applied during the process of preparation of the development plan in 2016 through the participation of main stakeholders. The public input was based on the reactions from the NGO sector, several groups of citizens and individuals, as well as on the several meetings and workshops conducted with local residents in 2017. Although the city-owned site is highly valued on the growing real estate market, both the Strategies and the Action plan 2017–2018 enabled its reuse by dedicating this area to creative industries, cultural economies and various types of cultural production. The projects related to Cultural Stations were similarly propelled by existing cultural grassroots initiatives and local cultural activism. The initial idea was to facilitate challenging social and environmental situations through culture and emerging community activism, which would re-profile local values and restore neglected built heritage, while at the same time boosting cultural exchanges with similar neighbourhoods in other European cities.

The intertwining processes of participation and co-creation are equally visible at the level of small projects, such as the New Places—46 Urban Pockets, focused on

open public spaces (Interview A3). The methodology of redesign included participative work with local communities and focus groups, consisting of members of the local civil grassroots initiatives, cultural associations and local champions. The aim was to identify problems, types of intervention and the future contents of selected sites, followed by an open call for design without technical preconditions. A similar process had been implemented in various neighbourhoods earlier, but the original idea had to be modified due to a lack of funds. The project also demonstrated resilience and flexibility by shifting into another model of citizens' co-creation of public contents and spaces through the initiative New Places—Micro granting. It was launched in 2018 when the local government awarded ten proposals with small grants. With the assistance of the association of local architects, these proposals were later implemented to involve creative solutions that allowed citizens to 'decide what their environment or micro-sites will look like, making these spaces as new places for cultural content' (Interview A1).

4 Discussion

Already in the very early phase, the complexity of the initiative, in addition to the lack of capacities at the local governance level, exemplified highly challenging project implementation (Interview A4). The Selection Panel (The Selection Panel, 2016) thus underlined several initial problems ranging from the lack of interaction between creative industries and market-led opportunities, over insufficient international cooperation with other elected ECoCs, to the necessary integration of cultural strategy and urban development plans. The panel also emphasised weaknesses in the processes of public participation, decision-making and implementation, which had to be adjusted to the 'City and Citizens' criterion aiming to foster the involvement of the citizens and increase the long-term cultural and social development of the city (European Parliament & Council of the EU, 2006). The same problem was noticed by local experts. For example, the coordinator of the long-term cultural planning of Novi Sad concluded the following:

In many projects (...) participation of both citizens and cultural professionals was, in my opinion, exemplary and beyond expected. In many others, their very consumerist spectacular form disables any real participation. (Interview A3)

Furthermore, some projects, although labelled as participatory, did not include that element. For example, *Šajka*—the art installation by Yoko Ono—was not embraced by the local population being criticised as a 'a bunch of nothing' (Kljajić, 2019), failing to support and strengthen the local identity. Previously mentioned large-scale festival-like events are even more problematic, demonstrating a radically different logic from the initial ideas of inclusion and diversity, which is the approach that does not provide the sustainability of cultural events and cultural spaces in the long run.

These issues brought up further concerns regarding the lack of a strong connection between the city-level cultural institutions and citizens (Interview A4), which could jeopardise the socio-economic and cultural sustainability of the overall concept, as already seen in the cases of some Western cities, like Cork in 2005 (O’Callaghan, 2012) or Liverpool in 2008 (Boland, 2011; Campbell, 2011). It, therefore, remains an open question whether such initiatives contribute enough to addressing local issues while meeting the expectations of local communities whose needs are not taken into consideration. However, the CEO of the Novi Sad 2021 Foundation underlines the specificities of the transitional local environment (Interview A1), which certainly had a significant impact on the process of implementation. Consequently, the lack of clarity regarding the development vision also reflected on the legislative level.

Besides the two mentioned primary strategic documents enacted before the application, the implementation of the Novi Sad 2021 programme has been also based on other documents, such as the Action Plan of Cultural Development 2017–2018 (City of Novi Sad, 2017), adopted according to the Cultural Strategy. The long-term planning, along with a new legal framework for directing and governing the culture-driven urban development, was to be integrated into the new General Urban Development Plan (GUP) of Novi Sad, which was finally adopted in July 2022. This plan sets the directives towards balanced economic, social and spatial development by 2030, but its finalisation lasted 10 years due to the ongoing structural changes of national legislation on planning and building.

The financing was also challenging. The national government officially declared the project Novi Sad 2021 a high priority of national importance (Republic of Serbia, 2016). The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, as the intermediate level of governance, was another important political and economic stakeholder. However, since 2016, its active financial support almost completely lacked, with only a few implemented projects. The private sector was active in the preparatory groundwork, supporting and (self)developing the sectors of the creative and cultural economy. For example, in the area of the Creative District, one of the investors is the Manual Forgotten Arts Museum. It is a multimillion private investment in the manual production of leather goods, with a show room and a museum of different crafts historically connected to Novi Sad. The other private investments in that area include a private IT educational centre and a museum of computing industry, as well as the headquarters and museum of the EXIT music festival. However, the major share of investments comes from the marginal city budget. In addition to recently brought up ‘insufficient financial transparency of the project’ (Interview A4), these issues could not only destabilise the envisaged urban rebranding concept but also provoke some negative associations with it, undermining its economic sustainability.

Apart from financial restrictions, the whole implementation process has been frequently threatened by the setbacks caused by the inherited administrative structure, unable to produce creative management solutions within the existing legal framework (Interview A3). Therefore, in January 2017, the city government established a non-profit foundation Novi Sad 2021 ECoC, in order to enable an optimal deliverance of all segments of the programme. Additionally, the Working Group for

Capital Infrastructure Projects, founded by the mayor, became active at the beginning of March 2017. Consisting of three members with strong political support, this body ensured the continuity of the process and was active in guiding and advising city departments in charge of planning, investments and property. Nevertheless, the lack of motivation and capacity of the city administration remained among the main implementation problems (Interviews A3, A4). For example, the Bid Book initially included the neighbouring municipalities of Sremski Karlovci, Beočin and Irig, symbolically named Zone 21 after the regional dealing code, which they share with Novi Sad. Although the main idea behind widening the area was to provide benefits for extended communities, the actual coordination between them showed many weaknesses.

In addition to the lack of effective management and the strategic prioritisation evident on the local administration level, the Working Group performed under the constant pressure of complex legal procedures, within strict time and budgetary limitations. The Foundation also faced problems related to the low level of elaboration of the projects of cultural infrastructure (Interview A3), insufficient inclusion of the professionals from the relevant city institutions and even misunderstandings regarding the actual objectives of the ECoC initiative (Interview A4). In response, the Steering Committee organised three bodies working closely with the Working Group: the Board of Architectural Experts (local and international) and The Council for the Creative District and the Council for Creative Stations, both consisting of the representatives of local residents and artists who are professionals in cultural management.

Finally, the most recent implementation challenge represented the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in postponing the event to 2022 (Interview A1). Since March 2020, the project of Cultural Stations has become the focus of all infrastructure and programme activities. The shift to digital platforms required developing and implementing a totally new approach, which implies that the ‘professionals who work on the projects must be creative and think outside the box’ (Interview A4). From the perspective of the Foundation, the situation was solved in a manner that introduced new cultural practices:

The past year has encouraged us to think differently, use modern communication channels and significantly raise the capacity of the local scene. (Interview A1)

Consequently, the online event Doček (New Year’s celebration 2021) was regarded as unique in Europe thereby promoting:

... new spaces for culture—the first City Concert Hall, cultural stations and the facilities in the Creative District; thus, expanding the audience, which could follow the program around the world, it has also become a kind of a postcard from Novi Sad and an invitation to visit the city in 2022. (Interview A1)

While the Foundation does not emphasise the impact of the pandemic, postponing the event may have resulted in a somewhat decreased involvement of stakeholders and even less transparency in its operation, also complicating the overall

management (Interview A3). Consequently, the impact of the ongoing situation is yet to be fully evaluated.

5 Conclusions

In comparison to other cities where urban regeneration and revitalisation initiatives are often focused on historic city centres, the case of Novi Sad 2021/22 demonstrates a different approach, characterised by the dispersed network of projects, ranging from small to large scale. This approach is beneficial regarding the inclusion of different neighbourhoods, which could strengthen the overall urban identity and sense of belonging among the communities and foster their development through culture and cultural production. In addition, the overall urban rebranding concept uses all three types of the ‘city image communication framework’ as defined by Kavaratzis (2004). These involve primary types—including unintentional, given the historical and environmental circumstances of Novi Sad; secondary, with intentional circumstances based on marketing practices; and tertiary, created by media and social interactions. Additional features of the new urban brand imply that it initially reflected the intention to use creative processes for social inclusion, reconciliation and regional opening. It further indicates the potential of the ECoC in facilitating both the branding of the place(s) and the inclusion of activities and stakeholders. Finally, the urban (re)branding of Novi Sad, as an ECoC 2021/2, is firmly embedded in urban spaces, and consequently, it could contribute to the overall sustainability, even after the end of the cultural year.

On the other hand, there were certain discrepancies between the initial ideas and their implementation. The project Novi Sad 2021 was conceived upon the thesis of Hassen and Giovanardi, which claims that cultural/ethnic variety could be used both as a competitive advantage in attracting an international audience and an element of preferred urban creativity (Hassen & Giovanardi, 2018). Indeed, the initial (re)branding concept did directly include minority heritage and contemporary cultural production. However, in later phases, this aspect was diminished and exchanged for the overall creativity of Novi Sad, as a single community. This demonstrates the possibility of further conflicts, which is a feature often associated with the branding of multicultural communities (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Hassen & Giovanardi, 2018). Such multiple and possibly conflicting interpretations of urban identity and history could trigger hidden tensions and thus negatively manifest on the cooperation of the stakeholders, overall inclusion and the future social sustainability of the introduced projects.

One of the earliest indicators of the serious implementation challenges of the Novi Sad 2021 initiative occurred at the level of public participation and co-creative branding, which has been ambiguously manifested and interpreted within different scopes. These activities were initially praised but more recently criticised for their reliance on spectacular events, which promote consumption-oriented approaches and crave publicity. This abrupt conceptual shift confirms the widely recognised issue in numerous ECoC projects reflecting in severe contradictions between their

aims and implementation (Lähdesmäki, 2014). Moreover, the noticeable dissonance between the ambitious scale and the problematic project implementation highlights serious difficulties for urban governance in fragile transitioning contexts—particularly in following the ECoC agenda and covering the burdensome costs in the face of limited budgets and preparation deadlines. Therefore, the case of Novi Sad supports the broader claims that adaptation of local/national planning systems according to ‘European’ standards in marginal urban contexts does not necessarily lead to a genuine shift towards an active and integrated development tool.

The already compromised implementation dynamics of the project and the eroding cultural and branding concept were additionally confronted with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Along with the existing transitioning challenges, such circumstances require innovative approaches, new ways of thinking and efficient action, which definitely classifies Novi Sad 2021/22 as a specific ECoC case. However, contrary to the creative opportunities that the crisis provided, the local government demonstrated only a moderate level of adaptation to the set of new conditions. This additionally threatened to jeopardise the previously established rebranding concept—originally embedded in urban space but pivoted to a virtual one, without genuine consideration of its reciprocity as an advantage. All the above-stated challenges finally indicate that the large-scale culture-based initiatives in complex urban contexts should be considered not only as groundbreaking opportunities for an effective urban rebranding and redevelopment, but also as the initiatives of high risk that depend on the inclusion, innovation and flexibility for reaching the desired outcomes.

Appendix: List of Interviews

Interview 1: Mr. Nemanja Milenković, CEO of the ‘Novi Sad 2021—European Capital of Culture’ Foundation. Conducted in March, 2021

Interview 2: Ms. Tijana Palkovljević Bugarski, PhD, Head of the ‘Novi Sad 2021—European Capital of Culture’. Conducted in March, 2021

Interview 3: Mr. Goran Tomka, PhD, Assistant Professor at UNESCO Chair in Cultural Policy and Management in Belgrade and Faculty of Sport and Tourism in Novi Sad, Serbia. Coordinator of long-term cultural planning of the city of the Novi Sad European Capital of Culture 2021. Conducted in March 2021

Interview 4: Ms. Biljana Mickov, responsible for creative industries at the Institute of Culture Vojvodina, Novi Sad, Serbia, and culture researcher at the University of Reims, Champagne—Ardenne, France. Conducted in March, 2021.

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