

Thomas Schmitt / Jonas Lendl

The EU's European Capital of Culture format between local and international cultural policies

Insights from the German bidding process for the 2025 European Capital of Culture

HPHS 2



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Foreword

This second volume in the Heidelberg Papers in Heritage Studies and Cultural Policy (HPHS) series also focuses on cultural policy. It analyses the bidding process and activities of German cities bidding to become European Capital of Culture 2025; as is well known, the city of Chemnitz emerged as the winner. Apart from minor corrections and additions, this volume is essentially a translation of the German-language Volume 1 of this series (Schmitt/Lendl 2024), which was published in December 2024, shortly before the opening of the 2025 Capital of Culture year. More than a year has passed between the publication dates of the two volumes. This gap is unintentional rather than planned, due to the centrifugal demands of life as a university lecturer. The two authors hope that, despite the delay, the present volume will be of interest to an international audience, in terms of both the empirical material presented and its theoretical and conceptual embedment. Nevertheless, the impression cannot be avoided that, except for a few recent updates, the core text was written some time ago and, with its focus on the years 2015 to 2020, describes a time that has passed, it reports on processes and events of a bygone era. This does not necessarily diminish the value of the text, but it does shift the debates from the immediate present to the already historical. Even at first glance it is clear that domestic and foreign policy contexts have changed significantly, which has inevitably had an impact on cultural policy, cultural productions and the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) format. Further, the coronavirus pandemic, which was experienced as a profound disruption to social life in 2020/2021, influenced the competition described here in its final phase (cf. chap. 3, among others).

In terms of foreign policy, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine shifted important foreign and domestic policy coordinates in Germany, shaking supposed certainties about progress in building a rules-based world order committed to human rights and 'reasonable' action. The start of Donald Trump's second term as US president and the launch of Chemnitz's year as European Capital of Culture in 2025 roughly coincided. The internationally disruptive US policy did therefore not have a relevant impact on Chemnitz's programme

planning. The potential of AI language models that are ubiquitous today, such as ChatGPT, only became known to a wider public in 2022, when the Capital of Culture bidding phase described here was completed. The extent to which these models will prove to be a blessing or a curse for human society seems completely open at present; a lazy answer here is to assume ‘ambivalence’. Ten years ago, many would have dismissed today’s possibilities of generative AI as medium-range science fiction. Interestingly, Chemnitz’s Bid Book 2 already outlined art projects using artificial intelligence (Stadt Chemnitz 2020: 67), without, however, addressing its potentially disruptive function. In terms of domestic politics, the most significant shift in Germany since 2020 has probably been the rise of the AfD, a party which is classified partly as right-wing populist and partly as right-wing extremist. The question of the extent to which cultural work can be used to halt the rise of right-wing populist or right-wing extremist political forces influenced the bidding activities in Dresden and Chemnitz, as well as in other candidate cities, and it is reflected upon by the authors in HPHS Vol. 1 (and in this volume). This was rightly identified in 2020 as an important issue, but here too, social developments have taken a different course from that assumed by the authors (and with them, probably many socio-political observers). The presence of right-wing populist and right-wing extremist forces is no longer limited to a few neighbourhoods, cities or regions, as seemed to be the case in 2017 or 2018, but appears to have become a new German normality, fuelled not least by the anti-Enlightenment influence of new social media. Although supporters of parties that are democratically and constitutionally oriented, and committed to core values such as human dignity, are still in the majority (at the beginning of 2026), the AfD now ranks as the strongest political force in polls in eastern German states, and it seems possible that it could provide one of the state premiers in the foreseeable future. Whether this development will continue, stagnate at a high level or be reversed in the medium term is difficult to assess at present. The fact that young people, including first-time voters, are often attracted to such right-wing parties and obviously share their views argues against naive optimism in this regard – and in favour of enlightening and empathetic cultural work. For reasons of quantitative effectiveness, even more

important are corresponding activities on social media. In other words, the question discussed in this volume, namely whether ‘cultural means’ can be used to oppose (extreme) right-wing ideology, remains valid and relevant. However, the question of scale arises: isolated local cultural projects, however valuable they may be for specific communities and individual biographies, can hardly counter the new hegemony of (extreme) right-wing ideology on ubiquitous platforms such as TikTok. There is therefore an urgent need for democratically oriented cultural actors who can exert influence on these platforms (especially as long as the platforms are not heavily regulated). – A few days before this volume was completed, I had the opportunity to speak with Stefan Schmidtke, the Managing Director of the European Capital of Culture Chemnitz 2025, about how cultural initiatives – for example, within the framework of the ECoC – should respond to the rise of right-wing tendencies. He argued that further polarisation of the city’s society (for example, through the type of programmes offered) would not be helpful, but that basically it is important to wake a common commitment from different population groups.

The main text of this publication concludes with an outlook on the Capital of Culture Chemnitz, which, when the manuscript was written, was still in the future. The Capital of Culture year 2025 has now come to an end. Some expectations and fears about the Capital of Culture year were fulfilled, others were not. After the controversy surrounding the appropriateness of the jury’s decision in favour of Chemnitz (cf. p. 55), the city opted for a fresh start in terms of personnel and content for the preparatory phase. The actual programme was to be developed by the Chemnitz community in a much more participatory manner. In the eyes of some outside observers, however, and perhaps for this reason, there were few prominent highlights, such as the exhibition *Edvard Munch. Fear* in the Chemnitz Art Collections. Conversely, the hope was that these cultural activities would have a positive impact on Chemnitz’s society and that these changes would be long-lasting.

In the run-up to the ECoC year, there were not implausible worries that right-wing populist or right-wing extremist groups could hijack, or at least seriously disrupt, Chemnitz’s year as Capital of Culture. This was evidenced by the

extensive police presence, barriers and checks during the official opening weekend in January 2025, because a demonstration by the extreme right and a counter-demonstration had been announced. Overall, however, the feared disruptions did not materialise, at least not on a large scale. Within Germany, the Capital of Culture year has given the city of Chemnitz a high media profile. With the adoption of a ‘White Paper on the Future of the European Capitals of Culture’ at a major conference in April 2025 – prepared, significantly, just by the cultural adviser Mattijs Maussen (see chap. 7) – the city sought to provide impetus for the further development of the European Capital of Culture programme. The extent to which the city’s image has changed in the long term, both externally and in terms of its own self-perception, and the extent to which the structures of local and regional civil society and awareness of art and cultural production have been strengthened in the long term, remains to be seen.

Also on behalf of my co-author Jonas Lendl, I would like to thank our numerous interlocutors who made the research for this book possible. In autumn 2025, the German cultural policy community received the news of the death of Hans-Joachim Wagner, who had led the Nuremberg bid office with dedication and a fine human touch, and who often made himself available to us for discussions. This loss made it clear how much cultural policy is shaped by convincing personalities.

Thomas Schmitt, March/April 2026

Abstract

The EU format *European Capital of Culture* is regarded as the European Union's flagship cultural policy initiative. Before a city is designated *European Capital of Culture* (ECoC) for one year, it must prevail over other interested cities in a nationwide selection process. The authors analysed the nationwide selection process for the (German) European Capital of Culture 2025, and in particular the activities of the eight candidate cities, using qualitative social research methods. In addition to writing the obligatory *bid books*, the candidate cities organised numerous events to prepare for the bid and to sensitise and mobilise the local public in respect of related issues. In addition to making the competition comprehensible, the research has added value for the understanding of overarching urban, cultural and European policy debates.

The study presents central results of the project, drawing on empirical material such as interviews and observation memos. One focus is on the presentation of competing ideal-typical readings of the ECoC format and its organisation, as well as the question of how the coexistence of these readings affects the relative success of the EU format. At the same time, the position of local and international stakeholders and institutions in the multi-level governance field of the selection process becomes clear. The study draws on empirical material from several candidate cities. It is rounded off by taking a look at the bid of the 'winning city', Chemnitz, but also at the situation in the unsuccessful cities after the end of the bidding process.

1. Introduction

The EU format *European Capital of Culture* (ECoC) is regarded as a cultural policy flagship project¹ of the European Union (Hitzler et al. 2013: 1); not only in the assessment of external observers but also in its self-description (cf. EU 2009; EU 2014: 2). The plan to select at least one *European Capital of Culture* (known up to the end of the 1990s as *European City of Culture*) every year was launched in the early 1980s. According to the initiators, in particular the then Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, this was intended to counterbalance a purely market economy and technocratic understanding of European integration (cf. Mittag 2008: 55). The programmatic orientation and governance of the initiative have undergone significant changes since the beginning, for example through the development of an elaborate two-stage selection process for interested cities with the decisive involvement of an international “independent jury of experts” (EU 2014: Art. 6). Since the 2010s, applicant cities have been expected to present artistic, cultural and urban policy concepts that correspond as closely as possible to the overarching objectives of EU cultural policy (cf. EU 2014: Art. 1–3). The annual Capitals of Culture are in different member states each year, in an order determined by EU bodies. Since 2014, it has been clear that one of the two Capitals of Culture in 2025 would again be in Germany, the other being in Slovenia, and that the competition would be decided by the end of 2020. More than a dozen German cities considered applying for the title of Capital of Culture 2025. In the end, eight official candidate cities submitted a first version of the required *bid book* in September 2019 (Fig. 1 and Table 2). After a pre-selection by the international jury of experts at the end of 2019, five cities remained (as experts agree: a relatively high number), which were expected to submit a second bid book nine months later. In October 2020, the jury of experts finally selected the city of Chemnitz (a large city in the state of Saxony), which had made international headlines in the summer of 2018 due to violent racist incidents.

¹ In official EU terminology, the ECoC initiative is referred to as an “*action*” (cf. EU 2014), which may seem counterintuitive to outsiders. In this text, we also use the more understandable and appropriate, albeit unofficial, terms “initiative”, “programme” and, in particular, “format”.

For the participating cities, the ensuing period was anything but a time of simply drafting an illustrated application. Rather, it was characterised by numerous public cultural and political events and campaigns, semi-public cultural policy activities, internal networking and strategy meetings, with the help of professional cultural advisers and the involvement of numerous local and regional stakeholders. This dense sequence of events was a huge feat for the key players in the bidding process, as became clear time and again in the accompanying and retrospective discussions. For the two researchers, it offered a point of departure for gaining insights into the processing of current cultural, urban and European political issues. This book presents central results of a multi-year research project (funded by the German research foundation DFG) that accompanied the bidding process for the German ECoC 2025 using qualitative and ethnographic social research methods (cf. Schmitt 2017).

In this book, we will summarise the basic results of the project. Among other things, different interpretations of the ECoC programme are presented, the specific governance of the selection process is analysed, and arguments concerning the relative success of the programme are discussed. Drawing on the ethnographical research components, discrepancies are revealed between public staging and internal perception of the application process. In addition, the book addresses methodological aspects of the research.



Fig. 1: Germany and the European Capital of Culture: Former European Capital of Culture cities and candidate cities in the selection process for 2025.

2. State of research and our research approach

The European Capital of Culture format has been investigated, albeit by no means exhaustively, variously in the social sciences and cultural studies, from the point of view of different disciplinary backgrounds, including sociology, European ethnology, geography or cultural economics (e.g. Palmer 2004; O’Callaghan/Linehan 2005; Mittag 2008, Quenzel 2005 and 2008, Habit 2011; Güntner 2012; Immler/Sakkers 2012; Biermann 2013, Hitzler et al. 2013; Kubicki et al. 2020). The EU’s ECoC initiative is interesting in several respects as an object of research for contemporary social sciences and cultural studies, as its implementation combines cultural, urban and European policy discourses and practices in a unique way. The programme provides a “valuable window on current ideas about what culture can do for cities” (Griffiths 2006: 417), and can be regarded “as a laboratory and resonance space for current hegemonic, but also subaltern urban cultural policies” (Schmitt 2017: 2). The competing cities have to deal not only with national and European cultural and urban policy expectations, but also with current urban cultural policy trends; successful cities are sometimes able to set new trends, as in the case of Glasgow in 1990. The application guidelines also require the cultural programme to be aligned with European themes and perspectives (EU 2014: Art. 5).

Most publications on the subject to date have dealt with *confirmed* Capitals of Culture, their cultural and artistic programmes, their staging as cultural metropolises, or their effect on urban development policies. Only a few publications deal with the assessment processes that precede the selection of a city. The paper by Aiello/Thurlow (2006) on the visual semiotics of ECoC application presentations is one of the corresponding exceptions. Griffiths (2006) compares the bidding strategies of various British cities for the year 2008. He essentially relies on a textual analysis of the bids and attempts to depict “city/culture discourses”; the “interviews with key personnel” (p. 417) mentioned in the methods section don’t seem to play any relevant role in the analysis, as far as the reader can make out.

Richards/Marques (2015) use a mix of methods to look at the bidding process in the Netherlands for 2018, focusing primarily on procedural elements. The

book by Kubicki et al. (2020), published while we were carrying out our own research, examines the influence of the ECoC programme on political culture in Poland.

Despite these recent publications, there is still a need for “comparative qualitative and ethnographic reconstructions and analyses of the bidding and selection processes for the European Capital of Culture programme, which do not take a retrospective approach but rather one that accompanies the process and pays equal attention to the ‘losers’” (Schmitt 2017: 3). The project presented here is aimed at closing this gap.

Ernst/Heimböckel (2012: 10) advocate the establishment of “comparative diachronic research on Capitals of Culture”. They distinguish heuristically the levels of (1) cultural policy and its (European) institutions, including debates about Europe, (2) urban policy decisions and developments (with reference to research on interculturality and human geography), (3) the level of media representation of Capitals of Culture, and (4) the level of artistic realisation. Our research project extends this claim to the level of the bidding process. We make a distinction between (1) cultural, (2) urban and (3) European policy aspects (Schmitt 2017: 6). In addition, there are (4) procedural issues, for example the governance of the ECoC programme in general, the bidding processes in different candidate cities, the distribution of power between different stakeholder groups, or the frequent demands for participation in the cultural and artistic programme and in the preparation of the bid books. In all of these areas, (5) social issues can also become virulent: in the urban policy field, for example, the negative consequences of gentrification processes (e.g. Megerle 2017; Günther 2012), or in the cultural policy field the question of how to address and include different milieus and groups of residents.

Loosely based on Griffiths’ somewhat casual formulation quoted above (2006: 417: the European Capital of Culture as a “valuable window on current ideas about what culture can do for cities”), our own research, based on our preliminary work, assumes that investigating the ECoC application processes not only has value for understanding the ECoC programme itself, but also has

added value for understanding current urban, cultural and European policy debates (Table 1).

In the limited scope of this book, it is not possible to conclusively address this extensive list of research questions by presenting our own ethnographically acquired material. We will concentrate on selected aspects and, if necessary, take up further facets in other publications, in particular in the dissertation (not yet completed) of one of the two co-authors (J. Lendl). We have chosen in this book to demonstrate how the ECoC format can be approached from different academic perspectives, and in particular to show the different interpretations of the ECoC programme in the research field, as well as the question of the relevance of these interpretations and their interdependencies for the relative “success” of the ECoC initiative. At the same time, in line with our ethnographical approach, the book also aims to provide concrete empirical insights into the bidding process, its “atmospheres” and the perceptions of relevant actors. While the text deliberately provides insights into a number of different candidate cities, it ends with a close look at the bidding process of the “winning city”, Chemnitz.

Table 1: Central dimensions of the research project

Content dimensions	<i>Central topics:</i> – Urban policy and its goals: visions of urban development. Benefits/disadvantages of major events for urban, regional and tourism development. – Cultural policy: cultural policy approaches; interpretations of art, culture and cultural policy and their significance for societies. Top-down versus participatory approaches; “sustainability” of cultural projects. Cultural heritage and/or new cultural production. – Social policy: social visions; social impact of urban projects and cultural interventions; cultural and urban policy and social cohesion. – European aspects: visions and representations of and for Europe; their practical realisation. <i>Another topic:</i> – The new political right and the ECoC programme Overlaps between these dimensions
Procedural dimensions	– Governance and governmentality between different measures levels, committees, institutions and stakeholder groups of the ECoC programme (e.g. position of the jury, governance within the applicant cities/regions, claimed versus actual participation).

3. Methodological approach and spatial contexts

Our own research on the bidding process was directly stimulated by the public deliberations in the city of Nuremberg regarding a bid for the title of Capital of Culture 2025, which began in 2015.² Building, among other things, on the experiences of a project seminar in the winter semester of 2016/17, the funding for a research project was successfully acquired from the German Research Foundation (DFG) (cf. Schmitt 2017). From autumn 2017, this allowed us, supported by student assistants,³ to follow the bidding preparations of German cities and the nationwide selection process for the ECoC, using qualitative and ethnographic social research methods. More than 100 events were observed for this purpose: 99 in the eight applicant cities or initiated by them, and five events connected with the national selection process. A total of 69 formal qualitative interviews were conducted during the bidding activities and also retrospectively. The interviewees were the heads or other employees of the bid offices in the bidding cities, in some cases the mayor or other politicians, employees of the municipal cultural authorities and established local cultural institutions, members of the independent cultural scene and NGOs. We also conducted interviews with cultural advisers and the responsible person in the EU administration. The chairwoman of the selection panel did not respond to several interview requests. In addition to these formal interviews, we learned a lot from numerous informal conversations, for example on the fringes of events, in an informal atmosphere and away from a recording device, when people spoke much more openly about their personal views and feelings in connection with their work. While the first round of applications concluded in December 2019, the final phase of the application process was affected by the Covid

² At that time both authors were affiliated to the Institute of Geography at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, which was located in Erlangen, around 20 kilometres from Nuremberg.

³ We would like to take this opportunity to thank the students who supported this project at three different universities, for example by carrying out desktop research, making transcriptions, and in some cases making their own surveys at events (especially at the Institute of Geography of the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg). These include: Hannah Schabert, Lukas Eichenseer, Jan Garkisch, Alice Belych and Lukas Ullinger (Univ. Erlangen-Nuremberg), Theo Lebek (Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel), and Anna Haesen, Luise Stöhr and Jasmin Wölke (University of Heidelberg). We would also like to thank the students who participated in two courses at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg.

pandemic; this affected not only the work of the researchers, but also that of the application offices and the organisation of the competition as a whole. A further pillar of our research, in addition to ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews, consisted in analysing documents, in particular the bid books of the participating cities, council minutes and concept papers, EU regulations, press articles and other text, image and video documents.

We considered the extensive empirical material from our own research in the light of the existing literature on the ECoC format and approaches in cultural studies, social and political sciences and cultural policy, and formulated our own theses on this basis. These theses were first presented in several public lectures⁴ and have since been further developed and modified. This study discusses these theses, and presents examples of the empirical material we collected, with quotations from interviews, documents and – as is usual in ethnographic research – edited⁵ excerpts from research diaries, notes of conversations, and observation memos. This helps to make our theses plausible; at the same time, the excerpts make it possible to reveal something of the intellectual and emotional “atmospheres” of the selection procedure and the evaluation processes. The numerous illustrations and photos, for example of events in the applicant cities, also serve this purpose. From the point of view of professional photography, these may appear deficient in many cases; the photos were mostly taken spontaneously from unfavourable seating positions. Despite this, or rather because of this, they may be considered as providing an adequate or – to use a term that is often problematised in cultural and heritage studies – *authentic* impression of the respective events, rather than one that is specially staged for the camera.

At the beginning of our research, the main task was to identify those cities that would definitely take part in the competition. In addition to the actual future applicant cities, the cities of Mannheim, Leipzig, Stralsund, Halle, Rostock,

⁴ For example, in joint presentations by the authors at the Franconian Geographical Society in Erlangen (25 June 2018), at the "New Cultural Geography" conference in Eichstätt (2019), and in two specialist sessions at the German Congress of Geography in Kiel (2019).

⁵ The main purpose of the editing is to make the notes comprehensible and, if necessary, to provide contextual information, as well as to anonymise the individuals concerned.

Pforzheim and Kassel, among others, were at times seriously considering pursuing an application. The city of Kassel organised public events for this purpose, one of which we were able to attend, but it decided against making an application in March 2018. Even though we aimed to (and were able to) monitor all candidate cities to a certain extent: In view of our two-person research team and the high number of eight cities which emerged as serious applicants, located in five different German states, it was necessary to set certain priorities in our observation of the cities. Pragmatic aspects also played a role in determining which cities we would investigate. For us, the city of Nuremberg was a particularly interesting candidate in terms of cultural policy, especially at the beginning; at the same time, it was very easy for us to reach, so that it was no problem to observe numerous events there. One of the reasons why the city of Dresden seemed interesting to us in the first round of the competition was that in its events and programmes the application team explicitly addressed the city's image as a hub for right-wing populist and far-right extremist activities. Although Dresden was eliminated after the first round, similar issues have been even more pressing since 2018 in the city of Chemnitz, which is only around 60 kilometres as the crow flies from the Saxon state capital of Dresden. The racist riots in Chemnitz in the summer of 2018 also gained international attention, and the question arose as to how the city, and the Chemnitz bid team in particular, would react to this.

Of the eight bidding cities, five were located in eastern Germany and three of these were in the federal state of Saxony. This is striking in that only around one sixth of the population of the Federal Republic of Germany lived in eastern Germany during the competition period. The possible causes of the over-proportional representation of east German cities in the application process were also discussed in informal talks between stakeholders and observers. The last European Capital of Culture in Germany, elected in 2010, was Essen and the Ruhr region, located "deep in the west" of the Federal Republic. It is possible that eastern German cities now considered themselves to have greater chances in the competition for this reason. The cities that took part in the competition obviously saw it as an opportunity to press forward their own development, as

well as to gain more national and international visibility. In addition, there were effects of regional imitation or competition, for example in the federal state of Saxony (see Chapter 6), and also in the western federal state of Lower Saxony, with the bidding cities of Hanover and Hildesheim, which are only about 30 kilometres apart.

Figures relating to bidding activities: City of Chemnitz



Fig. 2.1: A workshop held during the conference ‘Stat(d)t Kultur: Chemnitz 2025’ (*Culture in the City: Chemnitz 2025*), November 2017. Around 170 people registered for the entire conference.



Fig. 2.2: A city walk in Chemnitz as part of the above-mentioned conference (2017). Ideas for initial Capital of Culture projects in public spaces were presented.



Fig. 2.3: Demonstration by the New Right in Chemnitz, 7 September 2018.

A banner protesting against such demonstrations has been hung on the Karl Marx Monument: 'Chemnitz is neither grey nor brown'. Some counter-demonstrators and observers can be seen in the foreground.



Fig. 2.4: An open-air cultural event organised by the Chemnitz State Theatre as an attempt to use culture as a counter response to racist marches in the city (7 September 2018). The approaching thunderstorm forced the event to be cut short.



Fig. 2.5: Cover of Chemnitz’s bid book for the pre-selection round (2019): ‘Aufbrüche’ (New Beginnings – Opening Minds. Creating Spaces).
© City of Chemnitz (2019). Reproduced with kind permission.



Fig. 2.6: A double page from the Chemnitz bid book for the pre-selection round, showing two photos side by side: on the left, riots in Chemnitz; on the right, ‘yellow vest’ protests in Paris.
The juxtaposition can be interpreted as an attempt to place the 2018 demonstrations in Chemnitz in an international context, but also to render their racist character invisible.
Source: City of Chemnitz (2019: 24–25). Reproduced with kind permission.



Fig. 2.7: Pages 1 and 2 of Chemnitz's second bid book (2020): Large-format references to international media coverage of the 2018 riots in Chemnitz.

The press reports highlight the international relevance of the local events and reveal the racist nature of the riots. The Guardian article also refers to initial attempts to respond to the local situation through cultural means (in this case, a rock concert).

Source: City of Chemnitz (2020: 1–2). Reproduced with kind permission.

4. Excursus: Openness and trust in communications between competing candidate cities and in the research process

In addition to the logistical challenges of carrying out qualitative research on eight cities, the problem arose during the research process of building *trust* with stakeholders⁶ who were themselves in fierce competition with each other and who were careful to ensure that, despite all external commitment and demonstrative collegiality, they did not provide their rivals with any information that could weaken their own chances. Their priorities and possible “trump cards”, or surprising elements in their bid books, were not to be made known to the public, and especially not to the competing cities, prematurely, to prevent them from reacting to this information in their own applications.

In addition to this general caution, we researchers encountered an additional, specific mistrust in the first few months after entering the field. We were regarded, at least by some stakeholders, as being not independent, but ultimately agents of the city of Nuremberg (we were employed at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg at the time; the university’s Institute of Geography was based in Nuremberg’s neighbouring city of Erlangen), with the aim of eavesdropping on the competitors.⁷ Over time, we were able to dispel these (quite understandable) reservations by pointing out that our project was funded by the “neutral” German Research Foundation, that our research design obliged us to act with impartiality, and by making it clear that for us, as cultural researchers, the meaningfulness of the ECoC programme was a fundamental question to be answered.

However, this caution did not only apply to us, but was also evident in other contexts, for example in accusations levelled against certain cultural advisers who were engaged for particular occasions or consultations during the bid preparations by various cities and/or the *Kulturstiftung der Länder* (Cultural Foundation of the German States). In this regard, the question was raised

⁶ The topic of trust is often reflected on in qualitative ethnographic research; see, for example, Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr (2014: 45–47).

⁷ We were confronted with this accusation by a senior employee of an applicant city on the fringes of a conference in spring 2018.

retrospectively as to what extent their knowledge of the plans of one city affected their work for other cities (Ritzer 2020; 2020a). A further sign of caution in this regard is that fact that, in autumn 2019, the city of Magdeburg decided to refrain from publishing its bid book on its own website after the first successful application round, in order to make it more difficult for competitor cities to copy ideas from it for their own bid book.⁸

The teams from the applicant cities met at several conferences and meetings which were partly organised by the cities themselves; the first was the *Conference of the Competitors* in autumn 2017 in Dresden, followed later by conferences in Chemnitz (Fig. 2.1. and 2.2) and Magdeburg (Fig. 5.1 and 5.2), as well as meetings organised officially by the *Kulturstiftung der Länder*. In accordance with the etiquette and official norm of such meetings, the aim was to discuss and present the EcoC format in a friendly manner; at the same time, each team obviously wanted to avoid giving the other teams too deep an insight into their own plans, strengths and weaknesses. At the conference in Magdeburg in 2018 entitled *The European dimension – whether and how candidate cities can contribute to reshaping Europe*, the programme included a *Brief presentation of the Slovenian and German candidate cities*. The Nuremberg bid team solved the dilemma outlined above between public expectations and their own reservations by showing a short, specially produced and very effective film (Hansjana 2018) that staged *children* (the boys wearing ties) as the doers in a fictitious Nuremberg bid office. This clearly shows how seriously the application process was taken and how much effort was put even into such details as a brief introduction; at the same time, the chosen form revealed nothing of Nuremberg's application strategy, which was probably the intention.

The bid offices also found themselves in a strategic dilemma vis-à-vis the local public. Since convincing the international jury of active local support was seen as one of the conditions for a successful application, motivating local residents to support the bid meant actively communicating possible objectives and programmes to the public by organising events or, for example, giving

⁸ Verbal information from a person involved in the Magdeburg application process, 2019.

interviews in the local press; there are numerous examples of this in all bidding cities. On the other hand, the competitive nature of the activities forced the application offices, at least according to their own strategic assumptions, to keep certain elements of their planned programme as a surprise, and thus unknown to the public, until the bid books were submitted.

Once initial irritations regarding our own partisanship had been overcome, we were met with a certain degree of openness by central players, such as the application offices. Occasionally we were given “exclusive” information in conversations and interviews, or we were admitted – especially by the Nuremberg application team – to some internal or semi-public meetings with a large number of participants which dealt, for example, with the integration of the region into the ECoC application. But all application offices took care to ensure that we – like all other observers – did not receive any information in advance, the disclosure of which would prevent intended moments of surprise or which could be useful to other applicant cities. However, these understandable restrictions did not negatively affect our research project, which was focused on the effects of urban and cultural policy debates and practices.

The advantage of our ethnographic research approach over one limited to the analysis of documents and/or expert interviews became apparent in situations where people gave us more insights into their own position in informal conversations (without a recording device) than would have been possible in “official” interviews. These conversations are also proof that it was possible to build up a certain level of trust with actors from different cities. Here is an example from an informal conversation that took place in 2018 on the fringes of an event, in the evening over a drink (“over a beer”) with a worker from an application office:

From the research diary, spring 2018: The person told me: “I feel exhausted after so many projects. You have to give all you’ve got for this kind of project [the Capital of Culture bid], but you don’t know if it will succeed. Although the bid team has the full support of the mayor, and the city administration knows that, we feel thwarted by people in the administration who don’t want any changes; they say: “That’s not my job”. – Then they are overwhelmed by requests from

the cultural scene: everyone wants to get involved with their own projects or help to write the bid book, but it has to be written centrally by us. On the other hand, there is hardly any interest among the general public in the city, or in the outlying areas, especially not in the middle generation.⁹

A few months later, the research team conducted a *formal interview* with the same person (and another member of the application team) using a recording device. In this interview, they described their own situation in much more positive terms and the difficulties mentioned above were only hinted at or not mentioned at all. This shows the advantage of an ethnographic research approach, which is not based solely on formal interviews, for example, but also opens up opportunities for informal observations.

⁹ Reproduced from notes written on the evening of the informal conversation. These have been edited (to preserve the anonymity of the person and for stylistic reasons), shortened and translated into English.

Figures relating to bidding activities: City of Dresden



Fig. 3.1: Dresden's debate culture I

In September 2018, as part of the Capital of Culture bid, a public discussion was held in front of a large audience at the Kulturpalast in Dresden under the title “Controversial! From expressing opinions to transgressing boundaries”. On the podium (from left) are Marcel Beyer (winner of the Büchner Prize), moderator Andreas Berger (Head of Culture at the regional public broadcasting station MDR Saxony), Frank Richter (theologian and civil rights activist) and Bernhard Pörksen (professor of media studies in Tübingen). The male-dominated panel was introduced by Anne-Katrin Klepsch, Dresden's deputy mayor for culture. The event attracted national attention, partly in the wake of the previous event in March 2018, which featured two writers with opposing views, Durs Grünbein and Uwe Tellkamp.



Fig. 3.2: Dresden's debate culture II

Public discussion of the right-wing Pegida movement, held in March 2019 at the Schauburg cinema, following the screening of the documentary film *Montags in Dresden* (Mondays in Dresden, directed by Sabine Michel). The panelists included Cornelius Pollmer (a journalist writing for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*). The host was Michael Schindhelm, the curator of Dresden's ECoc bid.



Fig. 3.3: “Well then, join in... at the Places of Togetherness” (2018)

Brochure for a one-day decentralised event by the Dresden Capital of Culture Office. Numerous “places of togetherness” were used by artists and citizens to present their own projects. This participatory event is an example of the diverse formats in the candidate cities, in which local initiatives could apply for funding for ‘micro-projects’.



Fig. 3.4: One of the projects presented at the ‘Places of Togetherness’



Fig. 3.5: Another project presented as part of the ‘Places of Togetherness’ initiative: singing together at Dresden Central Station.

5. A brief overview of the selection process for the German Capital of Culture 2025

The European Capital of Culture programme is formally established in EU legal texts; these have been amended and expanded several times, with increasingly complex rules for the applicant cities and the organisation of the selection procedure, and increasingly specific content requirements (on the early history of the ECoC programme, see for instance Mittag 2008). In Germany, three cities had held the title before the most recent competition:

- 1988 (**West**) **Berlin**: the divided city had celebrated its 750th anniversary the previous year;
- 1999 the medium-sized east German town of **Weimar**, known for Weimar Classicism with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller as famous protagonists, as the place where the Bauhaus movement was founded, as the unofficial namesake of German parliamentary democracy from 1919 to 1933, but also for the nearby Buchenwald concentration camp.
- In 2010, the **Essen** metropolis and the entire **Ruhr region** won the selection process as the *Ruhr metropolis* against the medium-sized city of Görlitz in Saxony, which had applied as a twin city together with Zgorzelec in Poland. The focus was on the revitalisation, modernisation and cultural and artistic staging of an old industrial region.

In the selection process for the Capital of Culture 2025, the relationship between eastern German and western German applicants was an informally discussed topic. On the one hand, the “over-representation” in the field of applicants was concretised in the content of the applications by shedding light on disparities in eastern Germany. In 2018, public discourses commented on the pamphlet “*Integriert doch erst mal uns! Eine Streitschrift für den Osten [Integrate us first! A polemic for the East]*” by the Saxon SPD politician Petra Köpping, and empirical analogies were made between disparaging attitudes to East Germans and Muslims (Foroutan & Kubiak 2018). On the other hand, the relevance of the east-west question for the selection jury’s decision was regularly speculated about. Numerous German cities that are recognised nationally for their cultural

offerings (including Munich, Hamburg, Stuttgart, Düsseldorf and Cologne) did not enter the competition.

It had been known since 2014 that Germany (alongside Slovenia) would again be one of the two European Capitals of Culture in 2025. After 2014/2015, preparations for the bid by interested cities intensified. In Germany's federal system, in which the federal states are responsible for the cultural sector, the organisation of the two-stage selection competition was entrusted to the *Kulturstiftung der Länder*, as a specialised foundation of the German states. The standardised EU rules applied regarding the criteria for applicant cities, for their bid books, and for the composition of the members of the international selection jury. Table 2 provides an overview of the eight official candidate cities in Germany, their size, and the mottos of their bid books. As these were directed at the international selection jury, they were submitted in English; some German versions were also published. After the pre-selection, five of the eight cities were still in the running; the bid books in the second round were not simply revisions of the first ones, but independent productions in terms of scope, content and design.

Table 2: Overview of the German candidate cities for the title European Capital of Culture 2025

Applicant city	Population	Federal state	Initial Council resolution*	Motto of bid book 1 (2019)	Motto of bid book 2 (2020)
Chemnitz (selected ECoC 2025)	246,334	Saxony	01/2017	AUFbrüche. Opening Minds. Creating Spaces	C the Unseen – European Makers of Democracy
Hanover	536,925	Lower Saxony	02/2018	Agora of Europe	Normality Is Not An Option
Hildesheim	101,693	Lower Saxony	04/2017	Rüben, Rosen und der Sinn des Lebens: Re['ru:]ting Hildesheim	We Care – Beets, Roses and the Meaning of Life
Magdeburg	237,565	Saxony- Anhalt	01/2011**, updated 10/2015	Out of the Void	Force of Attraction
Nuremberg	518,370	Bavaria	12/2016	PAST FORWARD	PAST FORWARD
Dresden	556,780	Saxony	11/2014	Neue Heimat Dresden 2025 [New home Dresden 2025]	–
Gera	93,125	Thuringia	09/2018	Im Aufwind / Catching the updraft	–
Zittau	25,086	Saxony	9/2017	365° LEBEN 365° Life	–

*: Council decisions on the application

** : Assuming that Germany would host a Capital of Culture in 2020.

Source: Own compilation; population figures (for 31.12.2019): Destatis (2020).

Figures relating to bidding activities: City of Hanover



Fig. 4.1: Public presentation of the first bid book in Hanover in September 2019
After the welcome and introduction, excerpts from the bid book, which was written in the form of a novel, were read aloud.



Fig 4.2: The curtain has fallen: after the reading has ended and the curtain has fallen, the audience is asked to step outside.



Fig. 4.3: Outside, the audience is greeted by posters promoting Hanover's bid to become the European Capital of Culture, designed in the style of election posters and presented here for the press.

From the left (taken from a press release issued by the city [City of Hanover 2019]): Oeds Westerhof (strategic advisor to the bid), Konstanze Beckedorf (Head of Cultural Affairs), Sabine Tegtmeier-Dette (First Councillor and Head of Economic Affairs and Environment), Inga Samii and Melanie Botzki (Capital of Culture bid team).

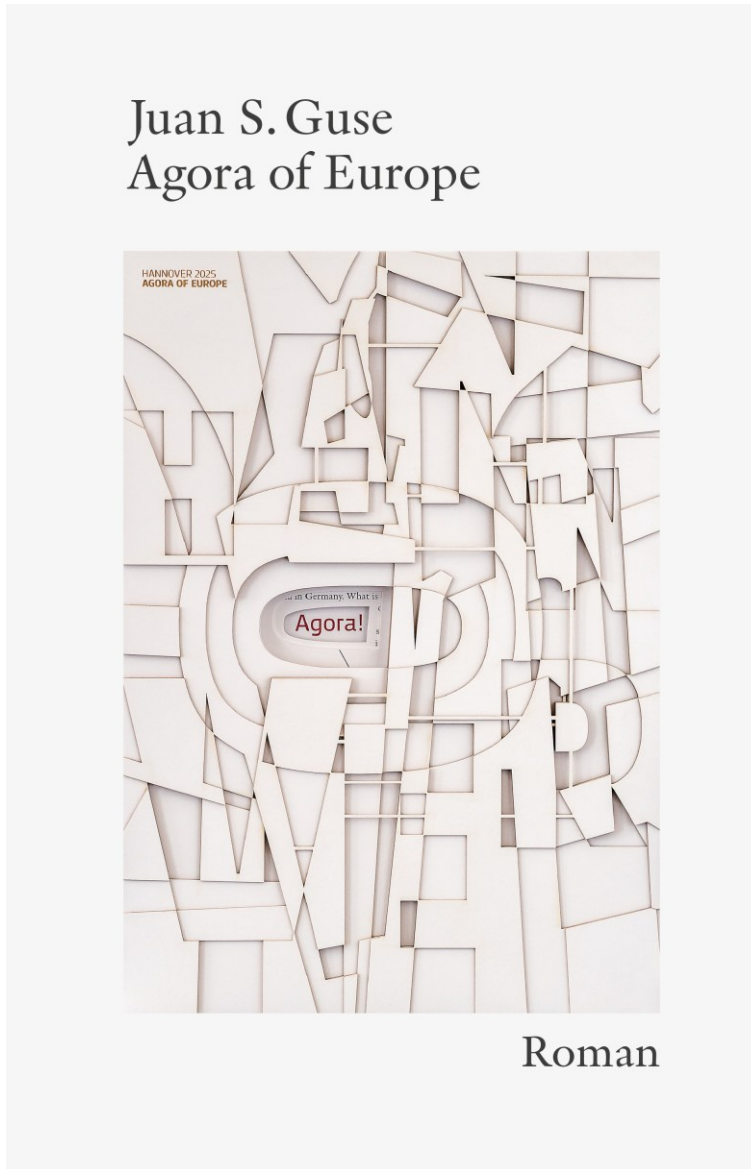


Fig. 4.4: A bid in the form of a novel.

In 2019, author Juan S. Guse (*1989) wrote the Hanover Bid Book I in the form of a novel entitled *Agora of Europe*, with a cover that was unusual for a bid book. In addition to the socio-political dimensions of the Hanover bid, this also highlighted its decidedly artistic aspirations.

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6. The co-existence of different interpretations of the ECoC format: polymorphism as an expression of arbitrariness or a guarantee of success?

The available academic literature does not paint a uniform picture of the ECoC format, and ascribes apparently contradictory characteristics to it. While some observers and authors regard it as the expression of – to put it succinctly – neo-liberal urban development policies and/or urban competition (e.g. Güntner 2012, Megerle 2017), others emphasise how the cultural programmes within and around the ECoC programme trigger cultural opening and awareness-raising processes (e.g. Leitner 2012). A first legitimate intellectual strategy for dealing with these apparently contradictory assessments is to point out that they reflect *particular experiences in certain* cultural capitals, which cannot be easily generalised across different phases of the programme development and across different cities and countries with their different political cultures. In addition, the different categorisations reflect the *different normative orientations and theoretical approaches* of the authors, for example when some emphasise the possibility of positive (albeit limited) effects on regional development, while others see an exacerbation of social problems in the cities concerned.

What applies to the academic literature also applies to the empirical field, especially as the two areas – the *doing* of cultural policies, on the one hand, and academic analysis of them on the other – cannot be clearly separated. Experience shows that important ECoC stakeholders read the academic literature, at least selectively, or even function as authors themselves. A range of different urban, cultural and European political positions exists among ECoC stakeholders or involved local parties. Quite heterogeneous cultural and political milieus, which are otherwise rather antagonistic, or, in the wording of Chantal Mouffe (2014), *agonistic*, can come together with the common objective of making a successful Capital of Culture bid. We argue that this is possible for two reasons:

Thesis 1: Obviously, the ECoC format *can be read and interpreted in many different* ways, meaning it is *polysemic*. These different interpretations lead concretely to *different designs* for possible cultural events with different formats

during the application processes, or in the cultural programme of successful Capitals of Culture. The concept of a “Capital of Culture” is thus not only polysemous, but tends to be *polymorphic*, taking various forms. This thesis, which is grounded in our empirical material, will be substantiated in the further course of this chapter.

Thesis 2: Potential polysemy, diverse connectivities, conceptual ambiguity and implementation-related polymorphism are not only central characteristics, but also important factors for the relative success and *high level of acceptance* of the ECoC concept by different stakeholders.

Before continuing, let us first comment on these theses:

The concept of *polymorphism*, which has, until now, never, or hardly ever, been applied in the social and cultural sciences, is deliberately used here, and not just the related concept of *polysemy*, in order to emphasise that different understandings can lead to strikingly different implementations of the ECoC idea, for example in terms of the cultural and artistic programmes and concrete governance of the local bidding process. The format can be read and interpreted in different ways, be linked to different intentions, and therefore also be implemented differently. It offers positive points of contact for various actors and institutions, which may be antagonistic/ agonistic when it comes to other issues and topics: for example, representatives of established urban cultural institutions, tourism, economic and regional developers, activists for resident-oriented, participative and sustainable urban development and cultural work, as well as the heterogeneous spectrum of independent local cultural phenomena: from – to name the extremes – people who want to include popular cultural productions in the programme to those who are in favour of experimental, aesthetically challenging or politically enlightening cultural formats that go beyond the horizon of the city concerned.

Thesis 3: In contrast to other urban development programmes that focus on large-scale events, the ECoC format is significantly *less conflict-prone* and does

not arouse resistance or protest among local residents. This can be explained partly by the *polymorphism* mentioned above, and partly by the *smaller-scale of expected interventions in the city's infrastructure*, which may appear desirable, or at least acceptable, to broad sections of the political spectrum. There is no doubt that the *high level of municipal autonomy* plays a role here: in the course of the debate surrounding the Berlin Olympic bid for the year 2000, this was elevated to a criterion of *sovereignty* and considered fundamental (Groth 1992).

In contrast to other “city festivals” or urban “mega-event projects” such as Olympic bids (see Häußermann/Siebel 1993; Betz, Hitzler & Pfadenhauer (eds.) 2011), the bidding activities of the eight German applicants for the title Capital of Culture did not trigger any significant resistance in the cities concerned. Although grassroots initiatives independent of the administration did form in some cities in the course of the application process – in particular the “Pro Nürnberg Kulturhauptstadt 2025” (NUE2025 for short) initiative in Nuremberg¹⁰ – these did not question the bid itself, but rather presented their own positions in a constructively critical manner. In some cases, grassroots initiatives that were committed to participatory, solidary and ecological urban development were included in the application process and presented in the bid books. A striking example of this is the project “*Kulturhauptstädtla*” (local dialect meaning *Small Capital of Culture*) by the Nuremberg initiative N.Ort (see below).

In the international context of the European Capital of Culture, our ‘positive’ finding of low conflict potential is not unique. However, in the history of possible European Capital of Culture applications, there have been political counter-movements in a number of cities, mostly initiated by the radical left and/or the alternative art and culture milieu.¹¹ Garcia/Cox (2013: 175) write about this in a study written for the European Parliament:

¹⁰ The initiative’s activities are comprehensively documented on its website: <https://nue2025.eu/> (20/10/2024).

¹¹ In Marseille, an Off festival was organised in 2013 alongside the official Capital of Culture events.

“Whilst most ECoC host cities, as a rule, stress the importance of engaging local people in the planning and delivery of the year (particularly since this has become an explicit requirement by the European Commission [...]), some cities have encountered direct opposition to the methods they use to engage and involve local people. Interestingly, when this is the case, opposition tends to be incentivised due to strong local currents of radical left-wing politics, or a vibrant alternative culture scene – which is in itself a positive indicator of strong local voices and a strong demand for open dialogue and debate, however controversial.”

It is interesting to note that the authors of the EU report fundamentally favour the local debate surrounding a Capital of Culture bid. But let us go back to the central argument of this chapter: first, the theses mentioned so far will be empirically substantiated and further developed in the characterisation of the different interpretations. In an ideal-typical manner (following Max Weber [1988, orig. 1904/1922]), we assign different readings of the ECoC format to different groups of actors. Where appropriate, urban, cultural and European policy aspects are differentiated for each reading.

Reading 1: The European Capital of Culture as a positive flagship programme of the EU to promote culture, culture-induced urban development and European cohesion (affirmative reading I)

Represented by: Officials and, above all, official EU documents

As expected, the EU documents communicate a very positive reading of the Capital of Culture programme and of European unity in the form of the EU. An example of this is the brochure “European Capitals of Culture: the road to success” (European Commission 2009), published for the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Capital of Culture programme. Conflicts and problems of the European unification process are barely addressed. Nevertheless, the official EU texts are open for a polymorphous reading of the ECoC programme, or at least make it possible. They provide various points of contact for relevant cultural productions, for example with regard to the dissemination of “access to participation in culture” (EU 2014: Art. 2), which seems compatible with the well

established concept of *culture for all* (Hoffmann 1981) developed in the 1960s and 1970s with a clearly progressive thrust, or the concept of a “civil right to culture” (Glaser/Stahl 1983). Overall, the EU texts are, as expected, of a markedly *affirmative*, ultimately harmonistic *character*, whether in terms of the image of Europe, the possibilities of urban development through culture, the role of culture production and the cultural sector for society as a whole, or the references made to local or pan-European cultural heritage. An example of this is the basic EU document for the period of the competition. With regard to objectives, it states that the EcoC is a European Union Action to

“safeguard and promote the diversity of cultures in Europe and to highlight the common features they share as well as to increase citizens’ sense of belonging to a common cultural area (...) foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities in accordance with their respective strategies and priorities (...) enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities (...) widen access to and participation in culture (...) strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors (...) raise the international profile of cities through culture” (EU 2014: Art. 2).

Potentially *problematic aspects of European integration* (for example in the areas of human rights, migration regimes, democratic deficits), *conflict-prone aspects of culture*, or the established practice of using culture to address social problems are not mentioned, at least not in this basic EU document. The fact that such critical views are nevertheless possible within the implementation of the EU programme is due on the one hand to the self-image of cultural and cultural policy actors in the applicant cities, and on the other hand to the governance structure with the establishment of a “panel of independent experts” in the selection process (see also the critical comments in chapter 7).

Although the EU’s detailed expectations of future Capitals of Culture are not an entirely new phenomenon, they are primarily a product of the 2010s and an expression of the increasing professionalisation and regulation of the selection process. Culture manager Tamás Szalay, head of the application office for *Magdeburg 2025*, and familiar with the EU programme since his involvement in

the (successful) application of the Hungarian city of Pécs for the year 2010, explains:

“I was involved in the application phase in Pécs. We also began this as a grassroots initiative (...) There were no forums [for exchange of experiences between candidate cities] back then (...) Nor were there any clear criteria given by the EU as there are today. There were no detailed questions [or guidelines to be worked through in the bid books]. Every city, and that was the slogan or catch phrase at the time, had to invent for itself the meaning of Capital of Culture. Of course, in principle it was already clear that it should be a sustainable project (...) You could say that the cities that are really remembered from this period all focused on the theme of structural change, from industry to culture, like Essen, for example, or Pécs to some extent” (interview with Tamás Szalay, April 2019).¹²

According to this interview, the focus on defined criteria that is now an established part of the Capital of Culture competition was the result of a bottom-up movement that wanted the EU to make the conditions more concrete, for instance in order to counter attempts by national governments, particularly in eastern Europe, to influence the programme. Thus, on the one hand, the criteria are a good instrument for ensuring the cultural quality of the ECoC format, but on the other, due to their invariably affirmative or positive formulation, they could encourage a “softening” of the programme (see also chapter 8).

Reading 2: The ECoC programme as a means of branding, (economic) urban and regional development, and promotion of tourism (affirmative reading II)

Represented by: EU documents, regional developers, tourism and economic promoters, certain local and regional politicians, and, in some cases, the media.

In this interpretation, the ECoC format is primarily understood as a means of promoting the location and branding the city or region in the areas of business and tourism. In terms of urban policy, it can be linked to strategies for modernising infrastructure, planning spectacular new buildings and

¹² The interview quotation has been slightly edited for better readability and authorised by T. Szalay (and here translated from the German).

“upgrading” neighbourhoods. In the European dimension, this reading relies on unproblematic and innocuous European issues. In terms of cultural policy, it favours lighthouse events with the greatest possible impact. It can tolerate or promote “critical” cultural events provided that these are likely to increase the city’s chances in the competition, or, following a successful bid, to raise awareness of the city supra-regionally during its year as Capital of Culture. To put it plainly, the relevant actors will use any means to promote their own city, especially in economic terms, including critical cultural work. This way of thinking lays the foundation for broad alliances in urban society, across different milieus and political camps, to support EcoC bids. Such alliances may be understood as a localisation of the progressive neoliberalism criticised by Nancy Fraser (2017). A hard retrospective criterion for a successful Capital of Culture bid would thus be a (not too narrowly understood) return on investment, i.e. a positive relationship between investment and results in the areas of tourism and new business enterprises.

An example of this reading: In 2020, one of the authors (Th. Schmitt) was contacted by a journalist from a public broadcasting company who was planning a report on the Capital of Culture competition. The person asked what the Capital of Culture title would mean for the city or the region, given the costs. The author replied that one should look not only at the economic aspects, but rather at what the title Capital of Culture makes possible for the local people, also in the sense of “self-reassurance”¹³. The person essentially replied that he/she hadn’t thought of that.¹⁴

¹³ We have adopted this term (in German “*Selbstvergewisserung*”) from local stakeholders. It was frequently used by key actors in the Nuremberg bid, for example in speeches at events relating to the bid process, in particular by Ulrich Maly (SPD), the former Lord Mayor and former President of the *Deutscher Städtetag* (*German Association of Cities and Towns*), and by Julia Lehner (CSU), who was then the city’s head of cultural affairs. See also the quote from the Nuremberg City Council proposal given below.

¹⁴ Reproduced in anonymised form from notes taken after the talk, and translated into English.

Reading 3: The Capital of Culture competition as a platform and funding opportunity for the local cultural scene and creative industries (affirmative reading III)

Represented by: Parts of the local or regional cultural scene and creative industries

Protagonists of local cultural scenes have often warned against designing the programme of a potential Capital of Culture using only external artists; instead, they call for appropriate representation of local and regional cultural practitioners in the programme, as well as their own involvement in its development. The *basic tenor* of this reading is thus that the competition is perceived as a positive means of promoting the local and regional cultural scene and creative industries. This interpretation is already contained in the EU texts (cf. EU 2014, with multiple references to the “creative sector” and a required “economic impact”). In the dimension of cultural policy, the cultural scene must be given the opportunity to present itself and raise its profile. In addition, there have been calls for the local cultural scene to be given better access to spaces, especially in view of high rents for rehearsal rooms. This problem was raised in particular in the big West German cities bidding for the title. The European dimension of a Capital of Culture called for in the central EU texts has obviously tended to be of secondary importance for members of the independent cultural scene, or possible implementations were derived from the cultural scene’s own needs. However, this ideal-typical generalisation does not necessarily apply to all actors.

In line with the heterogeneity of local cultural scenes, local initiatives have differed in terms of their degree of organisation, their own cultural and artistic self-image and aspirations, or, for example, their political orientation (see chapter 7 for some comments on the local cultural scene). The application process is criticised by this group to the extent that they would have liked more opportunities for participation, whether as actors or planners.

Reading 4: The Capital of Culture as a means of critically reflective urban, social, cultural and artistic practice, as a possibility for progressive urban development

that can meaningfully combine cultural, social, ecological and economic aspects (critically reflective affirmative reading; affirmative reading IV)

Represented by: Reflective urban and cultural politicians, as well as critical affirmatives from the cultural scene, politics and administration.

Under this heading, we group together a range of interpretations of the ECoC format that differ clearly in certain details. Their common core is that they are in principle positive and open-minded towards the Capital of Culture idea, but reject its interpretation as a project whose success or failure can be determined solely on the basis of economic indicators (such as business relocations, tourist overnight stays) and an external image gain (here: Reading 2). Instead, the Capital of Culture competition is seen as an opportunity for a reflective positioning and further development of urban society, for an urban awakening that takes social and ecological aspects into account, for the strengthening of local cultural potential and for the development of socio-critical, emancipatory, politically relevant artistic and cultural projects and debate formats that negotiate significant present and future issues.

Besides the potential benefits of a Capital of Culture bid, stakeholders also see possible risks, for example if stereotypical cultural productions are encouraged, or uncritical images of Europe are conveyed. The bidding period and the Capital of Culture year should instead open up opportunities to use cultural means for addressing social crises, or social challenges in general.

Such opportunities are not mentioned in the official documents of the EU which tend to be very affirmative. Instead, these ideas evidently stem from the self-perception and cultural understanding of politically clever employees of cultural administrations and local politicians with an interest in cultural policy. This attitude was also registered by the authors, for example in Nuremberg, whose municipal cultural policy was characterised for ten years by one of Germany's most prominent and respected social democratic cultural politicians, Hermann Glaser. He conceptualised the institution of socio-cultural centres, and proclaimed a "*civic right to culture*" in his writings (Glaser/Stahl 1983), but also saw socio-culture as a means of "*rediscovering the aesthetic*" (Glaser/Stahl 1974).

In the 1980s, he vehemently opposed the developing trend of reducing culture to a location factor:

“In a close co-operation between business and politics, the cities (providing they have enough money) are working on creating a glittering image for themselves. Cultural policy is becoming a stewardess who, with subtle make-up and a constant smile, offers managers the cultural advantages of a location. Culture makes it possible to demonstrate the ‘subtle differences’ in the midst of a levelled up middle-class society; and since Taylorism with its drill and dressage is dead, culture helps to create corporate identity” (Glaser 1988; translated from the German).

The following quotes from the main annex to a draft decision, prepared by the city administration and submitted to the Nuremberg City Council, can help to reconstruct the intentions of **Nuremberg’s** politicians and cultural administrators with regard to the Capital of Culture bid. The text clearly shows how various affirmative readings of the ECoC programme are interlinked. We have deliberately chosen a long excerpt, which starts with references to the relevance of the Capital of Culture format for cultural tourism and economic development (close to the ideal-typical Reading 2), and then increasingly focuses on the (potential) catalysing effect of the bidding process and the Capital of Culture year for reflection on, and addressing of, social, participatory and socio-cultural issues (close to Reading 4):

“Since the city’s anniversary in 2000, the self-perception and external perception of the city of Nuremberg as a cultural centre has gained in intensity. Many new institutions and initiatives in the creative scene have strengthened the existing cultural offerings. A distinctive cultural profile, such as that of Nuremberg and the region, is always a significant investment in the future in terms of social, economic and development policy, as well as cultural tourism. From this perspective, the city and region have a cultural profile that need not fear comparison with other European cities.

However, an application for the formal title of European Capital of Culture 2025 can unleash additional energy and ideas. The aim must be to involve all social groups. A Capital of Culture bid should not be equated with the conception and preparation of an art festival, but rather signifies a phase of civic self-assurance

within urban society, a stage of discourse on the major social issues of 2025, an opening up of the city to new and innovative ideas, a participation project for as many people as possible. The organisation team must therefore not see itself as a ‘festival office’ that draws up a programme calendar between January and December 2025 and books artistic contributions, but must be a laboratory of ideas, a catalyst, an animator and an enabler. This is the only way to ensure that, in the event of (always possible) failure, there is still a benefit and that the established cultural instances do not fear a loss of vested interests because other players step onto the stage. A Capital of Culture bid is a socio-cultural urban development project in which, ideally, as many Nurembergers as possible should participate and set new accents with their commitment, reshape the city and embrace it for their ideas” (Stadt Nürnberg [Ratsvorlage] 2016; translated).

The desire to make the bid for Capital of Culture an occasion for reflection on societal issues can be seen not least in the various formats and topics discussed in the early stages of the process. In **Nuremberg**, public panel discussions organised or co-organised by the application office were devoted to topics such as the future of work (on 18 December 2018 in the New Museum [Neues Museum] Nürnberg) or the “Reconstruction of right-wing spaces”.¹⁵ The renowned political theatre group *Rimini Protokoll* performed several times in public spaces in 2019 as part of the Nuremberg bid activities. The aim of making “Culture for All” and “Culture with All” visible in the application process was realised in particular by the “*Boulevard Babel*” event day in Nuremberg’s southern district. In the spirit of seeking participation, this one-day event was deliberately located in the socially disadvantaged southern part of Nuremberg and not against the iconic backdrop of the old city (Textbox 1, and Figs. 6.5–6.9). Multilingual teams spent a lot of time in the neighbourhood preparing the programme collaboratively with local residents.

¹⁵ Public Talk: Reconstruction of right-wing spaces, on 16 November 2019, at the *Neues Museum* [New Museum] Nuremberg.

Textbox 1: “Boulevard Babel” as an event in the Nuremberg bid for the title Capital of Culture

The regional press reported on the “*Boulevard Babel*” event as part of the Nuremberg Capital of Culture bid as follows:

“Around 10,000 people experienced a small miracle in the southern district of Nuremberg on the occasion of the first action day for its Capital of Culture bid: a busy street became a green zone, a party mile, a surprise package, a debating podium, a dance, theatre and choir stage, a giant reading desk and an information centre” (Ruf 2018, translated).

... and the same author commented on the event as follows:

“No Capital of Culture without citizen participation! The organisers, who are anxious to gain the European title for Nuremberg in 2025, repeat this like a mantra. But so far, it has not been possible to really visualise where the journey will take us. And what the title might bring for the city. The ‘Boulevard Babel’ campaign day was therefore sorely needed. It showed in a likeable, colourful and diverse way what can happen when culture, in a very broad sense, goes to where people live: onto the streets, right into the heart of a neighbourhood with a high proportion of migrants (...) Culture can transform the city. And even if it was a coincidence, nothing could have better countered the [right-wing, T. S.] AfD party conference taking place just a few kilometres away at the same time” (Ruf 2018a, translated).

Such events are also implicit statements about the way the “bid makers” understand culture, art and public debates. This also applies to the financial and organisational support given to the above-mentioned four-week cultural event “*Kulturhauptstädtla*”, initiated by the cultural collective N.Ort as a grassroots initiative for the Nuremberg EcoC bid (see chapter 7). A list, even a rough one, of all the public debates, cultural interventions and micro projects, or of the semi-public conferences preceding the bid process, initiated, sponsored or co-organised by a candidate city such as Nuremberg, would go beyond the scope of

this book. This also applies to other bidding cities such as **Dresden**, where the city's cultural department and the curator Michael Schindhelm used large public panel events to address the fact that Dresden was the starting point and main venue for the right-wing Pegida protests¹⁶ (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2). Several events organised by the "*Kulturhauptstadtmacher*" ("Culture-Capital makers") remained in the public memory and were reported in the national press: In 2018, there was a discussion between the two well-known Dresden writers Durs Grünbein and Uwe Tellkamp, who displayed antagonistic attitudes towards the Pegida movement. This was followed in September 2018 by a panel discussion with the East German theologian and civil rights activist Frank Richter, the writer Marcel Beyer and the media expert Bernhard Pörksen, under the title "*Streitbar! Von der Meinungsfreiheit zur Grenzüberschreitung*" (Ready to fight! From freedom of expression to transgressing the limits) (Fig. 3.1). Interpreted in a positive light, and partly due to the events organised by the EcoC bid office, Dresden now appeared as a German "Capital of Debate Culture", at least according to the sociologist Joachim Fischer who was interviewed for a regional newspaper by T. Baumann-Hartwig (2018). In the same year, the national weekly magazine *ZeitMagazin* described Dresden as a place "from which the whole of Germany could still learn something" (Machowecz 2018: 6). However, it was somewhat irritating when these potentially relevant debates were framed as having an *instrumental* relationship to the EcoC competition. To some extent, statements by curator Michael Schindhelm could be understood in this sense, when, at the above-mentioned events, the EcoC bid context was emphasised, or it was asked what the current debate would bring for the bid.¹⁷ From a normative point of view, this was a strange reversal of goal and means. – With regard to the *European dimension*, it was possible, and in some cases even a *topos* within the bidding processes, to openly thematise the crises Europe was facing and not

¹⁶ Pegida is an abbreviation for *Patriotische Bürger gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Citizens against Islamisation of the Occident). It was a nationally known association founded in 2014, which was initially classified as right-wing populist and later as far-right. After ten years, it disbanded in October 2024.

¹⁷ Asked in the spring of 2019 by M. Schindhelm in a panel discussion on the film *Montags in Dresden* (*Every Monday in Dresden*), which dealt with the Pegida movement.

just deny them by depicting, in EU jargon, Europe's cultural diversity or referring to Europe's cultural heritage. One example of this is an interview in the newspaper *Sächsische Zeitung* (Dresden) with cultural manager and former EU panel member Ulrich Fuchs:

Question (interviewer Bernd Klempnow): "Dresden attaches great importance to becoming a model city for a new culture of debate. Will the topic still be of interest in a few years' time?"

Answer (Ulrich Fuchs): "I think so, because there is a lot of debate in Europe and about Europe. Much of what we once took for granted has changed. The European Union is struggling to maintain its self-image in the face of threats from member states that are leaving the EU or calling it into question. I believe that today, cities and regions can often find answers to these questions more quickly and more directly than state governments, which get bogged down in lengthy processes" (Klempnow 2018, translated).

Like Nuremberg, **Hanover's** bid was also based on a (partly) **political concept of art and culture**, but, in contrast to the Franconian metropole of Nuremberg, it also involved a good dose of **self-irony**. Initially, "*Hanover has nothing*" was propagated as the motto for its bid, alluding to the fact that, despite its political and economic weight as the state capital of Lower Saxony and as a trade fair location, Hanover had, in the supra-regional perception, no very distinct profile as a cultural metropolis. At the public presentation of the first bid book, after the reading of excerpts from a novel, visitors were led outside through a raised curtain, where they were greeted by a range of election-style posters, with questions such as "*Does culture move mountains?*" accompanied by a photo of a huge heap of rubbish, or "*Can art be deadly?*" with a reference to the Islamist attack on the editorial office of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (cf. Fig. 4.1 to 4.3). In the second round, an art action suggested that a political manifesto entitled "*Normality is not an option*" had been submitted, instead of a normal bid book, by the city of Hanover.

The bid by the city of **Hildesheim**, which is only about 30 kilometres from Hanover, also used plenty of self-irony. The bid motto "*We Care – Beets, Roses and the Meaning of Life*" was a reference to the city's cultural heritage with the

UNESCO World Heritage Site of St Michael's Church and St Mary's Cathedral (the supposedly thousand-year-old rose bush growing against its apse is considered a symbol of the city), to the joint candidature with the rural district of Hildesheim, which is known for its sugar beet cultivation, and to the socio-ecological search for meaning that opened the bid.

The **climate crisis** is a recurring motif in the majority of the application documents. The intensive phase of bid activities in 2018–2020 coincided with the emergence of the *Fridays for Future* movement. It was foreseeable at the time that the climate issue would increase in urgency by 2025. And indeed, in a few years' time, climate scientists will perhaps look back and see the beginning of the 2020s as a time when the measurable and tangible consequences of global warming increased significantly. The political awakening around 2019/2020 has currently (beginning of 2026) given way to disillusionment and resignation, making it all the more important that culture and art should continue to address the issue.

Reading 5: The ECoC format as an expression of neoliberal competition logic

Represented by: Critical external views from the political left and academia

In some publications in critical social and cultural studies, the ECoC format is interpreted as an expression of the logic of neoliberal competition between cities and as a medium of neoliberal urban development, including negative consequences such as gentrification and the displacement of residents (see Megerle 2017 for a discussion of the Capital of Culture Marseille-Provence 2013). Looking at the ECoC format through the lens of critical cultural theory, one might claim that past Capitals of Culture have shown a preference for exclusionary “lighthouse events”, pseudo-inclusive mass events and irrelevant, popular cultural productions with no social relevance. A politically based criticism could see the ECoC programme as a distraction from serious shortcomings of the EU and problems of European policy (for example, with regard to democratic deficits and the treatment of asylum seekers at the EU's external borders). Referring to the concept of governmentality, following Michel Foucault's perspectives (2004), it could be argued that the competition process

forces local actors into a corset of uncritical, EU-friendly positions, in which culture policy appears to be an innocuous means of promoting a location.

In terms of critical cultural theory, and also in our opinion, such perspectives are *important correctives* to the widespread positive narratives of the ECoC format. They draw attention to potential instrumentalisations of the Capital of Culture idea and political risks on the urban, cultural, artistic and European levels. At the same time, the criticism described by Marx (1976 [1844]: 380) as a *weapon* harbours the danger of becoming blunt if it is *absolutised* as the only valid classification of the ECoC format without examining concrete situations. In our analysis of the German bid process for 2025, and also in our consideration of the ECoC format in other countries, beyond the German context, moments of social and cultural emancipation have always emerged. An absolutising critique would, not least, fail to perceive the socio-politically progressive and culture-critical aspects that have been given space in the local bid processes (see remarks on Reading 4). As argued by Adorno (1972, orig. 1960) in his essay on *culture and administration* (*Kultur und Verwaltung*), this is possible when *personalities in key positions*, for example as heads of the application offices, promote such positions and cultural and artistic initiatives, in accordance with their professional responsibilities. – We were also able to observe *external* initiatives and actor groups that, due to their perseverance and strategic skill, succeeded in placing progressive content in the bid books.

Reading 6: The Capital of Culture format as the prey of an internationally active cultural counselling scene

Represented by: In particular critical journalists

In contrast to Reading 5, representatives of this position are not necessarily against the Capital of Culture format, but are critical of possible excesses, which in their opinion have become increasingly noticeable in recent years, without being clear to the wider public. Such accusations have been made by journalist Uwe Ritzer (2020; 2020a), in particular after the conclusion of the bidding process in Germany, and earlier, for example, from a Dutch perspective, by publicist Geert Mak (2020). This interpretation essentially concerns the work of cultural

managers specialising in the ECoC format, who have repeatedly acted as consultants for candidate cities in different countries. They have contacts in the selection jury and/or have switched over time between the roles of consultant and jury member. Thus, the ECoC format can be regarded as the *prey* of a circle of experts, whose members award each other consultant contracts and ensure that the cities that have hired the “right” consultants come out top in the selection process. This can lead to exchangeability of ideas and pseudo-localisation in the bid books and Cultural Capital programmes. Critics who speak out do not necessarily call for the abolition of the ECoC initiative, but for its reform, and for stricter compliance rules (cf. Ritzer 2020a). In 2020, due to media reports, the German Conference of Culture Ministers (*Kultusministerkonferenz – KMK*) initially postponed its expected confirmation of the jury recommendation in favour of Chemnitz and scheduled a meeting with the jury chairwoman, Sylvia Amann. In January 2021, the jury’s decision in favour of Chemnitz was unanimously confirmed, but at the same time a resolution was adopted by the German Conference of Culture Ministers that the European Commission should “strengthen the transparency and integrity of the selection process” (KMK 2021). – Concerning the role of international cultural advisers, see also chap. 7.

The relationship between the readings: complementary and/or antagonistic?

The question arises as to how these ideal-typical readings relate to each other in the real field of the ECoC selection process. Reading 2 and Reading 5 have their common starting point in an emphasis on the economic significance of the ECoC format. However, they look at it from different, incompatible perspectives. Reading 5 is ultimately a critical reconstruction and categorisation of Reading 2. Reading 4 also differs sharply in its approach from Reading 2: representatives of these two readings might appear to be in a conflicting relationship. In practice, however, the representatives of both (ideal-typical) readings can join forces in view of their common goal of winning the ECoC title for their own city. This applies to the above quotation from the document presented to the Nuremberg City Council, which contains points relating to several different readings.

Openness, connectivity, polysemy and potential polymorphism are, as we argue, important factors for the relative success of the ECoC competition.

Table 3: Different ways of reading the ECoC format: a schematic overview.

Reading	Basic attitude/relevant aspects
1	Basic attitude: The Capital of Culture format as a positive flagship programme of the EU to promote culture, culture-induced urban development and European cohesion – <i>Urban and social dimension:</i> culture as an instrument for sustainable local development and urban growth and as a means of raising the international profile of cities through culture – <i>Cultural dimension:</i> “to safeguard, develop and promote European cultural and linguistic diversity, to promote Europe’s cultural heritage and to strengthen the competitiveness of the European cultural and creative sectors”; to widen access to and participation in culture (cf. EU 2014) – <i>European dimension:</i> representation of the diversity of EU cultures (each of which can be experienced locally) and a common European cultural heritage
2	Basic attitude: The Capital of Culture format as a means of branding, economically understood urban and regional development and promotion of tourism – <i>Urban and social dimension:</i> modernisation of infrastructure; spectacular new buildings, “upgrading” of urban districts – <i>Cultural dimension:</i> lighthouse events with the greatest possible impact – <i>European dimension:</i> deliberately unproblematic and harmless references to Europe
3	Basic attitude: The Capital of Culture format as a platform and financing opportunity for the local cultural scene and creative economy – <i>Urban and social dimension:</i> more space and funding for the local cultural scene and cultural institutions in the city – <i>Cultural dimension:</i> opportunities for local artists to present themselves, participation, profiling. Promotion of local artists and cultural institutions.

	– <i>European dimension</i>: of little relevance or only included insofar as can be useful for the local cultural scene
4	<i>Basic attitude: The Capital of Culture format as a means of critically reflective urban, social, cultural and artistic practice, as a possibility for progressive urban development that can meaningfully combine cultural, social, ecological and economic aspects</i> – <i>Urban and social dimension</i>: ECoC as a mean of ecological, social and cultural urban development, that can provide answers to urban crises/problems; that encourages solidarity, cohesion and self-assurance of urban society – <i>Cultural dimension</i>: ECoC as opportunity for critically reflective cultural work; cultural policy as social policy. Emancipatory potential of art and culture: cultural productions aimed at providing answers to current crises – <i>European dimension</i>: not uncritical affirmation, but (also) engagement with Europe's crises and deficits in European policies
5	<i>Basic attitude: The Capital of Culture format as an expression of a neoliberal logic of competition</i> – <i>Urban and social dimension</i>: ECoC as a medium for neoliberal urban development; consequence: displacement through gentrification – <i>Cultural dimension</i>: Exclusionary lighthouse events; pseudo-inclusive mass events. Irrelevant, arbitrary cultural productions, without social/societal relevance – <i>European dimension</i>: a distraction from serious shortcomings of the EU and problems of European policy
6	<i>Basic attitude: The Capital of Culture format as prey to an internationally operating cultural counselling scene</i> Variations of similar ideas in different cities, pseudo-localised, initiated by international consultants who have their own cultural policy ideas and, above all, professional and financial interests in mind.

Readings 1 – 4 are, in different ways, predominantly affirmative, while Readings 5 and 6 are critical of the Capital of Culture format.

Figures relating to bidding activities: City of Magdeburg



Fig. 5.1: The 'Kubus 2025' (*Cube 2025*) for Magdeburg's ECoC bid.

Photo taken at the end of a three-day conference on the European Capital of Culture format held in March 2018, which was also attended by representatives of other candidate cities in Germany and Slovenia.



Fig. 5.2: Excursion to the so-called Aerosol site in Magdeburg.

The Aerosol site, located on an industrial wasteland in Magdeburg's harbour on the river Elbe, was home to graffiti and street art, some of it by international artists. It inspired the planning of projects for Magdeburg's bid to become the European Capital of Culture, such as *Urban Colours*. In 2020, the graffiti on the Aerosol site was removed. – Second from left: Tamás Szalay, head of the bid office for 'Magdeburg 2025' (photo taken in March 2018).

7. Stakeholder groups in the selection process: Positions, goals and options for action

The application process for the title of European Capital of Culture is a cultural policy regime in which international, national, regional and local stakeholders, networks of actors, organisations and institutions enter into a complex process of interaction. This results in formal similarities with other cultural regimes, such as the UNESCO heritage regimes (cf. Schmitt 2011 and 2015). In analysing such regimes, questions arise about the distribution of power between actors at different scales, about their discursive and institutional influence and hegemonies. This chapter aims to provide a brief overview of relevant stakeholder groups and institutions in the nationwide selection process, as well as their possible agendas, interests, possible courses of action and restrictions.

EU institutions and administration

EU bodies and the EU administration are the guardians of the procedure for selecting the European Capitals of Culture. They not only determine the order in which countries can take part, but have also defined in legal acts the official objectives and the rough structure of the selection process (cf. EU 2014 and EU 2017), with urban, cultural and European policy objectives (for the latter, see Quenzel 2005, among others). These include, for example, “promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens” (EU 2014: Art. 5). It is claimed that European Capitals of Culture fulfil the function of “making a crucial contribution to promoting the values of the Union” (EU 2017) – an expectation that systematically overtaxes the resources of a single city or region. Although the EU Commission is formally responsible for organising the selection processes (op. cit.), in reality these are delegated to national authorities. In the case of Germany, the competition for the Capital of Culture 2025 was organised by the *Kulturstiftung der Länder* (Cultural Foundation of the Federal States), in line with the fact that the states have primary responsibility for the culture sector in the political structure of Germany as a federal republic. The EU

administration remained largely invisible in the competition, apart from appearances by the responsible EU official at joint events of the nationwide selection procedure. In contrast to this low visibility of the EU administration in the selection process, delegations travelled “to Brussels” to present themselves to “the EU” as a candidate city, or – in the case of the three cities from Saxony – as candidate cities from the same a federal state. Despite this widespread absence of the EU institutions in the selection process (with the important exception of the *expert panel* appointed by the EU, see below), the EU has a hegemonic position in the competition because it sets the objectives and rules for the ECoC format.

The national level and the German states

According to the constitutional architecture of the Federal Republic of Germany, it is the German states, not the national government, that have the right to shape cultural policy and the corresponding legislation. However, since nationwide coordination and harmonisation is considered necessary or useful in numerous areas (including education policy, international cultural conventions and EU cultural policy), the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German States (*Kultusministerkonferenz; KMK*) was established at the end of the 1940s. This conference is responsible for international cultural policy (and thus also the ECoC format), although discussion with the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the department of the Federal Foreign Office responsible for cultural policy has now been established regarding cultural policy issues. The Standing Conference (KMK) has entrusted the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States (*Kulturstiftung der Länder*) with the practical organisation of the bidding process. The KMK only reappeared as a player in the competition when, at the end of 2019, public doubts were raised about the integrity of jury members and thus of the selection competition as a whole, and the formal confirmation of the jury’s decision by the KMK was delayed by several weeks (cf. chapter 6). The Federal Commissioner was not significantly involved in the content of the process, but promised the appointed Capital of Culture financial support in the

region of 30 million euros for programme design. The individual German states also pledged ‘their’ candidate cities the same level of moral and financial support as the federal government. It was noted that Bavaria, for example, increased its pledged support for ‘its’ candidate city of Nuremberg to 38 million euros, more than other German states. If several candidate cities from one German state competed (Lower Saxony with Hanover and Hildesheim; Saxony with Chemnitz, Dresden and Zittau), the federal states remained outwardly neutral and promised equal support to all cities. In line with the cities’ self-image as central actors and as far as we can tell, the German states did not interfere in the content of the cities’ applications. In the case of Dresden’s application, the jury even criticised the fact that the most famous cultural institutions in the city, practically all of which are owned by the Free State of Saxony, played no role in plans for the Capital of Culture year.

City leaders, city politics and local administration

The decision whether to apply for the title of Capital of Culture is made by the city council or municipal parliament, and it is involved in important decisions in the run-up to a bid. In line with the theses set out above on the high degree of connectivity of the ECoC format to different discourses and practices (chapter 6), approval of the bid was high across the political camps in all eight German applicant cities. During the period of our observations, only a few small political groups, usually far-right groups, were opposed to their city’s bid. Some cities decided against making a bid after examining the regulations, weighing up the effort involved, the potential return and their chances of winning (cf. Fig. 1). The mayor, and in some cases the head of the department responsible for culture, often played a role in respect of internal motivation and external profiling of the city. Quite often it was they, together with a few other people, who first mooted the idea of making a bid. The Nuremberg bid was significantly supported by the cross-party tandem of the then mayor of Nuremberg, Ulrich Maly, a nationally known local politician from the SPD, with a reputation for cultural achievements (according to a survey in 2018, the most popular mayor of a major city in

Germany¹⁸) and the then culture officer and current culture mayor, Julia Lehner (CSU). Charismatic leaders such as Ulrich Maly (SPD, Nuremberg) and Barbara Ludwig (SPD, Chemnitz) appeared, at least among the interested public, to be an advantage for the application. The same applies to the independent mayor of Zittau, Thomas Zenker, who in the course of the bid was able to attract national attention to what is by far the smallest applicant city (around 25,000 inhabitants), located on the periphery of the border triangle between Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. When Ulrich Maly surprisingly announced in 2019 that he would not be standing for the office of mayor again in 2020, many observers asked whether and how this would affect Nuremberg's chances in the EcoC competition. By contrast, from 2017 onwards, Hanover's application process suffered from the so-called "town hall affair", associated with publicly negotiated rifts and temporary vacancies in the highest ranks of the municipal government. The *reliability* and the *cultural and urban profile* of the municipal executives – restored in Hanover at the latest from November 2019 following the election of Mayor Belit Onay of the Green party – were undoubtedly of great relevance to those involved in the process on the ground. The interest of international jury members may in any case have been more focused on viable concepts than short-term local turbulences.

To generalise, the *cultural administrations* of the cities, especially in the first years of the long bid process – for example in the preparation of key council resolutions concerning the bid – were important thinktanks whose concept papers set the standards for the profiling of the bid in its urban, cultural and European dimensions (see the quotation in chapter 6 from the paper presented to the Nuremberg council). In addition, they generally steered the accompanying process of planning a municipal cultural strategy, which was necessary for a bid. In the further course of the bidding activities, however, they generally took a back seat in favour of the specially created application offices or Capital of Culture offices.

¹⁸ SZ [dpa] (2018).

The bid offices or Capital of Culture offices

In the course of the local application process, each candidate city set up an application office or ECoC office, which organised the application process outside the established structures of the public administration, promoted it with special events, and played a leading role in preparing the bid book. To name a few examples, the team in Magdeburg was led by Tamász Szalay, an internationally recognised ECoC manager, and in Nuremberg by the music specialist Prof. Hans-Joachim Wagner, who had already been involved in Cologne's (failed) bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2010. The city of Dresden chose a different approach, appointing the internationally renowned east German cultural manager Michael Schindhelm as curator for the application process, although he had no previous experience of the ECoC system and was not permanently present in Dresden. Hanover, on the other hand, relied on a dual leadership from the city's cultural administration in the persons of Melanie Botzki and Inga Samii. The installation of independent offices was not only due to the enormous amount of work involved in the application process: they also made it possible to operate outside of established hierarchies and administrative processes. The respective managers became the faces of the applications to the public, and played a decisive role in determining the focus and style of the bid books.

Cultural institutions and the independent cultural scene

Large **local cultural institutions** such as multi-genre theatres and museums generally supported the bids; they were involved in the application process, were used as venues, and were acknowledged in the bid books. One notable exception in Nuremberg was the then long-standing Director General of the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* (Germanic National Museum), Georg Ulrich Grossmann, who argued that the city should first provide adequate support for existing cultural institutions before applying for the title.¹⁹ Conversely, it was regularly argued that precisely such an application process would draw

¹⁹ This opinion was expressed in a conversation with one of the authors in autumn 2016.

attention to the situation of existing cultural institutions; improvements would not only be promised in the event of winning the title, but would take place during the bid process, which was the case, at least to a certain extent, in several applicant cities. Incidentally, the famous Dresden State Art Collections played virtually no role in the local application process, much to the surprise of the selection jury, with the unconvincing explanation that, as state institutions, they were outside the city's sphere of influence (cf. chap. 8).

In addition to state or municipal cultural institutions, **independent cultural scenes** also played a role in the local application processes. The independent scenes in the bidding cities proved to be heterogeneous in terms of cultural policy and their cultural and artistic activities, as well as their degree of institutionalisation, which is why we deliberately use the plural. In several cities, grassroots initiatives were formed that were independent of the administration and sought to accompany the application process in a constructive and critical manner; in the case of Nuremberg, the initiative “Pro Nürnberg Kulturhauptstadt 2025 - #NUE2025” even had its own website. In Hanover, independent artists formed a group with the name “Aufnahmezustand”²⁰. These grassroots initiatives were not against the ECoC bid, but sought to assert their right to participate in the process. To a certain extent they were actively involved in the local discourse (cf. Fig. 6.14). The public debate was primarily about *how* to make a good bid, in other words the programme content, mottos and the issue of participation. Grassroots initiatives called not only for local cultural practitioners to be included in the future ECoC programme, but also for genuine participation in the designing of the bid book. In a “*Call by the independent cultural scenes in German bidding cities for the European Capital of Culture 2025*”, initiated at a meeting in Magdeburg in 2018 and signed by cultural practitioners from six of the eight applicant cities, a “substantial right to involvement”, more intensive “participation”, and appropriate support for the independent cultural scene was demanded (Aufruf 2018). The relationship between application

²⁰ *Aufnahmezustand*: literally *state of admission* (but also possible: *state of recording*), the sequence of letters of this nonce word is almost identical to the established word *Ausnahmezustand* – *state of emergency*.

offices, cultural administration and independent cultural scenes was therefore by no means free of tension. After observing a meeting of a grassroots initiative in 2018, a student member of the research team said his impression was that the representative from the bidding office was bullied; the people present complained about those responsible for the city's EcoC bid.

The figuration between citizens and grassroots initiatives organised by cultural practitioners, on the one hand, and the application offices and the city administration, on the other, can be described, loosely based on a concept from clinical psychology, as a kind of *double bind*. On the one hand, the image of a participatory application process had to be conveyed to the outside world, also in view of the later judgement of the jury. This meant that the application offices could not afford to have grassroots initiatives perceiving the process as non-participatory or openly criticising it. On the other hand, their aim was to impress the jury with a cultural and artistic programme that was as original as possible and not just the sum of all the different proposals made by local citizens. At the 2017 ECoC workshop in Chemnitz, the mayor, Thomas Zenker (city of Zittau) described civic participation as a “mega buzzword” for the Capital of Culture bid, but one that was associated with a “huge conflict”. The cultural counselling scene also had advice for such dilemmas:

Impressions from the event „Wie geht Kulturhauptstadt?“ (How to do Capital of Culture), Bildungscampus Nuremberg, 15 March 2017 (memo, edited from handwritten notes made during the event, T. S.)

After several other speakers, a cultural consultant who is well-known in Germany speaks. He motivates the audience with regard to the jury's expectations, with the demeanour of a coach used to public speaking. He names the central strategic aim: the 12 jury members with their different interests must be convinced. My impression is that involvement of the independent cultural scene is subordinate to this aim: communicating authenticity, civic involvement and participation is part of the bid strategy and therefore has an instrumental character. Added later: The instrumental nature of the debates with regard to winning the title was perceivable again and again in the applicant cities, including in the large Dresden panel discussions.

In conclusion, we can say that the application offices used numerous (often comparable from city to city) formats to support limited projects by independent cultural practitioners and cultural initiatives. An interesting example in Nuremberg was the four-week event “*Kulturhauptstädtla*”, organised by the culture collective N.Ort as a grassroots initiative. A member of the group, Benedikt Buchmüller, a master carpenter and advanced architecture student at the time, designed a temporary wooden structure that was erected in a public square near the old town centre; it served as a stage or crystallisation point for various activities. An extensive programme created by volunteers offered, for example, theatre and yoga workshops, political discussions, or communal cooking (Figs. 6.10 and 6.11). The *Kulturhauptstädtla* is a prime example of how innovative, participative and socio-critical cultural formats are possible as part of EcoC bid processes (see also Ullinger 2020), formats which otherwise might not have received funding and organisational support from the city administration and local politicians. In the first Nuremberg bid book, *Kulturhauptstädtla* was described at length as a participative, bottom-up cultural project (Stadt Nürnberg 2019: 11). With reference to the arguments presented by Adorno (1972, orig. 1960; cf. also Schmitt 2011: 51) concerning the interplay between “culture and administration”, in this case it is the semi-autonomous application office that is able to provide “culture” with spaces and funding in the context of the EcoC bid.

So far, our analysis of relevant stakeholders has focused on the applicant city. However, it should not be forgotten that in all applications towns and districts in the surrounding area or **region** were also involved in the bid processes, which means they had to pass council resolutions and subscribe to joint agreements, concerning, for example, the design of the programme and financial contributions. The mayors, district and municipal administrators, cultural institutions and independent cultural scenes of these towns and districts were therefore also potentially relevant players in the application process; their involvement and coordination required committees and, in some cases, big conferences were organised (Fig. 6.12). In the case of Chemnitz, 38 cities and

municipalities were ultimately included in the cultural capital region; they all shared the ECoC title (Chemnitz2025 (2024)).

The international selection panel and external cultural advisers

In accordance with the relevant EU guidelines, future Capitals of Culture are selected by a “panel of independent experts” (EU 2014: Art. 6). Interested persons (“experts”) can apply to be part of the panel and are elected by several EU bodies – the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and the Committee of the Regions – according to a defined proportional representation. At regular intervals, some of the panel members are replaced, while others stay to ensure continuity. In the selection procedure analysed here, the ten international or European members were joined by two from Germany, appointed by the federal government and the German states. In a remarkable way, the jury was *omnipresent* during the process – in discussions, with regard to expectations, and as the subject and object of criticism – and yet it was *absent* apart from the few moments defined by the selection procedure. There was speculation in informal conversations about the cultural preferences of the jury or individual jurors. Some ECoC veterans repeatedly told the application teams and interested members of the public that the only thing that mattered in the bid process was convincing the jury that theirs was the best. Others, including the much sought-after cultural consultant Ulrich Fuchs, then a long-standing member of the jury, but no longer involved in the decisions for 2025, avoided conveying an overly instrumental view of the bid.

In addition to the theses presented above (chapter 6), we would formulate the following important thesis:

Thesis 4: The *quality* of the Capital of Culture competition stands and falls essentially with the *intellectual independence, integrity and cultural intellectuality* of the selection committee. The intellectual skills, cultural orientation patterns and artistic and aesthetic sensitivities of its members are decisive in determining whether the ECoC format is just an ordinary contest, an event that uncritically

affirms the EU, or a programme with cultural depth, especially as this is what the application teams expect.

We found the bid preparations in the cities we visited to be predominantly professional, committed and culturally sound. Thesis 4 should be modified accordingly:

Thesis 4a: For the development of such a format, it is sufficient in case of doubt that the city leaders and application teams work with the *expectation* that the jury is interested in a substantial cultural programme reflecting the local circumstances of the candidate cities.

However, the first real confrontation with the jury, as part of the cities' presentations in the first round of the competition, was sobering at least for some of the city teams:

From the research diary: Informal talk with a staff member in a bid office at the end of the first application round (2019)

The staff member divides the jury members into "intellectuals" and "event people". The jury is internally split, as he had also heard with regard to the (recently finalised) selection in Austria. – When the city's delegation appeared before the jury, some of its members asked questions in a harsh and unfriendly manner. (I [T.S.] wondered whether this was a strategy to draw the city representatives out of their reserve, or whether it was genuine unfriendliness that was out of place here). The members of the delegation were surprised how many questions were asked about the artistic content. One question was about the opening event. They wondered whether this was a good, deep question or a bad, superficial question. As a positive interpretation, they thought perhaps the jury member wanted to find out to what extent the application was sensual.²¹

In the run-up to their bid, cities such as Dresden and Nuremberg had invested considerable energy in numerous events which seemed to us productive and many of which were met with a very positive response. However, these events

²¹ Based on notes from the research diary, edited for publication.

were generally ignored by the selection panel, unless they were prominently referred to in the bid books or in the presentations before the panel. An interviewee with a very good insight into the EcoC system confirmed this finding:

“(...) the preparations that Dresden made, what they did in the *Kulturpalast* or in the theatre, with the debate between [the writers] Tellkamp and Grünbein: That’s something the jury takes no notice of. So that won’t be included in the judgement. It was certainly important for the political situation in Dresden. And it mobilised the interest of the cultural scene, so to speak. But that is something the jury doesn’t consider. Rather: the jury members, of course they do a bit of research into what’s going on in the city and whether everything in the bid book is true. But the decisive factor is the bid book and the [oral] presentation and the questions and answers”²²

To someone who has observed the selection process for many years, there is a clear discrepancy between the extremely diverse and impressive preparatory activities of the cities and the fact that these are reflected in the bid books, and thus brought to the attention of the jury, only to a limited extent. The responsibility for this lay ultimately with the authors of the bid books, who generally displayed impressive creativity in terms of content and design, despite the list of questions and the rules to be observed. Perhaps the EU should require documentation of the whole application process, so that the activities organised in the candidate cities are adequately represented – a small transfer-oriented suggestion arising from our research. It could be argued against this proposal that the plausibility of future plans alone should be the yardstick for evaluating applications. However, the required *capacity to deliver* of a city and a team can be demonstrated by such past activities.

It is well known in the social sciences that people or committees generally make decisions on the basis of limited information.²³ And that how this

²² Telephone interview, December 2019, a few days after the announcement of the preselection decision. The interview has been edited to a limited extent, and translated into English.

²³ For the World Heritage Committee, see Schmitt (2009: 114-116).

information is selected has concrete consequences in the decision-making process.

As indicated above, jury decisions are not always unanimous, and are often criticised by experts. An example of this is outlined in the following chapter based on Dresden's elimination in the first round of the selection process. At the end of the whole process, the expert panel was also criticised. Following the announcement of the jury recommendation in favour of Chemnitz, the journalist Uwe Ritzer, in several articles in the daily newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, based on his own research and referring to the Dutch publicist Geert Mak, drew an unflattering picture of the close relations between the expert jury members and several EcoC advisers who had been hired by many applicant cities. Mak (2020) referred to his knowledge of the selection process for the Dutch European Capital of Culture in 2018, which was won by Leeuwarden-Friesland.

“These advisers knew exactly what the jury wanted to hear’, recalls Geert Mak in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Local creative artists were deliberately thwarted. For example, (...) the bid book (...) was ‘precisely tailored to the pet interests of the jury members’. ‘The mayor and the other people in charge were drilled to say what the jury wanted to hear’, says Mak” (Ritzer 2020a).²⁴

In this reading, the loose network of internationally active cultural advisers and jury members specialised in the ECoC format must result in an ultimately interchangeable cultural production that is, beyond superficial references, not specifically related to any particular city. Indeed, the applicant cities had all to a varying extent engaged advisers from the field of art and culture, in addition to their own bid teams. Roughly speaking, these external consultants can be differentiated in a number of ways: firstly, in terms of their own cultural political and artistic orientation; secondly, in terms of their own national or even international experience; and thirdly, in terms of their previous experience with the ECoC format. The city of Nuremberg, for example, founded a ten-member

²⁴ Academic readers may be reminded by this passage of their own experiences of the academic system with its various competition formats. This would merit a detailed study.

advisory board, including the cultural manager and publicist Jagoda Marinić, the Catholic theologian and cultural politician Thomas Sternberg, the curator Tunçay Kulaoğlu, the former federal ministers Renate Schmidt and Oscar Schneider (cf. Stadt Nürnberg 2019a). Former ECoC juror Gottfried Wagner, publicist Robert Misik and industry designer Johanna Pichlbauer also acted as consultants for Nuremberg. The winning city of Chemnitz set up a programme committee, which included three professors from Chemnitz University of Technology and local artists, as well as various “European curators” (Stadt Chemnitz 2020: 147) and well-connected ECoC insiders, and in the final selection period the “Strategic Advisor for European Capitals of Culture”²⁵ Mattijs Maussen (see Ritzer 2020). According to Ritzer (op. cit.), the two cultural managers Neil Peterson and Mattijs Maussen advised “18 out of 22 successful Capitals of Culture in the period 2015 to 2025”. Ritzer also describes how, in October 2016, Jiří Suchánek, who was later a juror in the German selection process, visited the town hall of Nuremberg together with his business partner Mattijs Maussen; according to Julia Lehner, Nuremberg’s cultural officer, Suchánek “emphatically recommended his colleague Maussen as an adviser”. “The clear intention of the visit was to obtain a contract for him”, according to the culture consultant, as quoted by Ritzer (2020; translated). The readiness with which the Nuremberg cultural officer made negative comments after her city’s defeat contributed to the fact that the reporting in the southern German media was sometimes perceived as a campaign – in the Berlin *Tagesspiegel*, the defeated Nuremberg was said to be obviously in a huff (Hanssen 2020). However, the reports clearly cast a negative light both on the cultural adviser scene and on the expert jury; they are undoubtedly justified as criticism of problematic aspects of the ECoC format.

On the other hand, it should not be ignored that cultural advisers outside the EU institutions have contributed significantly impetus to the productive development of the ECoC idea since the 1990s. Patel (2014) highlights the importance of cultural experts for the professionalisation of the ECOC initiative.

²⁵ <https://cz.linkedin.com/in/mattijsmaussen> (last call 26.10.2024).

Long-term cultural strategies and external expertise were called for as early as the mid-1990s by John Myerscough (1994), for example. The report by his partner Robert Palmer (2004) followed this up by arguing in favour of clearer criteria, wider competences for the expert panel and more competition between the candidates. While this duo had been pushing the paradigm of urban regeneration for more than a decade ever since Glasgow, under the direction of Robert Palmer, won the title in 1990, Beatriz García, who worked on the Palmer report, argued in favour of a refocusing on culture. Patel's (2014: 569) conclusion is that "external experts have left their mark on the European Capital of Culture programme over the last 20 years without, however, completely determining its programmatic direction". Thus, Palmer, for example, voted in vain against giving greater weight to the "european dimension", which was perceived as vague. Overall, Patel (2014) sees the role that these well-connected expert circles played in the development of the initiative, as well as the [then] heterogeneity of the Capitals of Culture themselves, as evidence that European cultural policies functioned in a more disparate and decentralised manner than had previously been thought. If Ritzer and Mak assess the work of the expert groups for the recent past differently than Patel, this may indicate an unfavourable development of the ECoC programme, which must be taken into account in studies of the topic.

Based on research in the bidding cities and the national forums of the application process, this chapter has aimed to show which different stakeholder groups come into contact in the ECoC competition.²⁶ We have identified the potentially different motives, interests, views and interpretations of the stakeholder groups, their possibilities for action, and problems that arise due to their influence in the governance of the ECoC format.

²⁶ One of the authors (Jonas Lendl) will expand on this perspective in his monograph on the selection process.

Figures relating to bidding activities: City of Nuremberg



Fig. 6.1 (to 6.4): Impressions from the ‘Capital of Culture Day ‘*Let’s think*’ in November 2017 in Nuremberg.

The opening plenary session, attended by around 200 participants, not only discussed strategic issues relating to the Capital of Culture bid, but also awarded prizes for short videos made by young people from Nuremberg relating to the bid. In the foreground, the then Mayor of Nuremberg, Ulrich Maly (SPD), and the city’s Cultural Affairs Officer, Julia Lehner (CSU), are seen discussing the bid.



Fig. 6.2: An impression of the elaborate materials prepared for the Capital of Culture Day.



Fig. 6.3: After the plenary session, thematic issues relating to the bid were worked on in different locations throughout the city.



Fig. 6.4: Suggestions and possible outcomes were collected on display boards.



Fig. 6.5 (to 6.9): Impressions from the ‘Boulevard Babel’ action day in Nuremberg’s Südstadt district.

A normally busy street in Nuremberg’s Südstadt, an inner-city district considered socially disadvantaged and multicultural, was transformed into an event space for one day as part of the Capital of Culture bid (September 2018).



Fig. 6.6: Initiative groups could apply to participate in the ‘Boulevard’ with projects such as a ‘museum for a single day’.



Fig. 6.7: ‘N.Ort’, a collective initiative, offered food it had saved from being wasted.



Fig. 6.8: Some offers were aimed specifically at children and young people.



Fig. 6.9: Participation or pseudo-participation? Suggestions on how the city of Nuremberg could be changed for the better were collected on a display board.



Fig. 6.10: Impression of the Nuremberg *Kulturhauptstättla* (“Little Capital of Culture”).

The ‘Kulturhauptstättla’ was a four-week cultural urban intervention in the summer of 2018, initiated by the N.Ort collective and sponsored by the Nuremberg Capital of Culture Office. In and around a temporary wooden structure on Richard-Wagner-Platz in front of the Nuremberg Opera House, various groups organised activities such as a mime workshop, yoga, political discussions and lectures, and communal cooking sessions.



Fig. 6.11: The Nuremberg *Kulturhauptstättla*. A further impression.



Fig. 6.12: Plenary session of a regional cultural conference on Nuremberg's bid in the town of Lauf an der Pegnitz

In the foreground, among others, Nuremberg's cultural affairs officer Julia Lehner, the first deputy mayor of Lauf, Benedikt Bisping, and on the right the head of Nuremberg's Capital of Culture Office, Hans Joachim Wagner (who died in 2025).

Bids were expected to involve the surrounding towns and communities. Formal structures for cooperation were established between the applicant city and the surrounding municipalities. The half-day regional conference in July 2019 in the city of Lauf, located just under 20 kilometres northeast of Nuremberg, was intended to serve as a networking opportunity for regional stakeholders in the run-up to Nuremberg's bid.



Fig. 6.13: Party after the positive decision of the jury in the pre-selection process.

A few hours after the jury's pre-selection decision (announced in Berlin), which was positive for Nuremberg, a party was held in Nuremberg for the local supporters. On the stage were, among others, employees of the Nuremberg Capital of Culture Office.



Fig. 6.14: ‘Nuremberg, Capital of Culture – so what?’ A discussion forum organised by the newspaper *Nürnberger Nachrichten*.

On 16 December 2019, a few days after Nuremberg’s positive pre-selection, the regional newspaper *Nürnberger Nachrichten* invited guests to a cultural forum at the Orpheum Nuremberg. The progress of the bid was discussed, moderated by the NN’s arts editor. Also on the podium were: the head of the Nuremberg bid office, Hans-Joachim Wagner; Maria Trunk from *Quellkollektiv e. V.* (which sees itself as an interest group and platform for socio-cultural projects in the Nuremberg area); the city’s cultural affairs officer, Julia Lehner; and Philip Zerweck from the civil society initiative ‘Pro Nuremberg Capital of Culture 2025 – #NUE2025’.



Fig. 6.15: Numerous posters advertising the bidding process were displayed in public spaces in the candidate cities – here, a ‘Call for Ideas’ in the late stages of Nuremberg’s bid.



Fig. 6.16: Capital of Culture meeting under pandemic conditions.

End of July 2020: Subject to important restrictions (social distancing, and where necessary face masks) public life was revived after the first wave of the pandemic. The Nuremberg Capital of Culture Office presented the key content of the second bid book while observing the pandemic regulations in force at the time.

8. Cultural policy tensions in the ECoC competition

Policies relating to urban culture and art have been the subject of intense debate in the Federal Republic of Germany at least since the early 1970s. The slogans “culture for all” or “culture as a civil right”, as well as the key word “socio-culture” (German: “*Soziokultur*”; cf. Glaser/Stahl 1974; *ibid.* 1983; see also Knoblich 2001), which have already been invoked, mark a cultural awakening from which there can be no responsible going back. Of course, these terms are also subject to conflicts of interpretation. It would be a disastrous narrowing if “culture for all” were to be translated in such a way that only easily consumable cultural projects were to be enabled, without (in addition) very demanding projects. It is true that in culture-related sciences and corresponding fields of practice, other, internationally widespread buzzwords, such as “participation”, “inclusion”, “access” or “audience development” are preferred today. However, beyond such often interchangeable terms, it is possible to discern *continuities in content* between today’s cultural policy debates and those of the 1970s in West Germany. Additional, more recent concepts, such as cultural sustainability or the “post-immigration cultural institution” (museum; theatre; see for example Sharifi 2011), are attempts to align these cultural institutions with more recent social developments.

In the Capital of Culture genealogy, *Glasgow 1990* is generally regarded as an important milestone with which the ECoC format left behind its fixation on metropolises established as centres of “high culture”.

How do the more recent development of the ECoC format, and specifically the German selection process, fit into these debates? As shown in chapter 6, the relevant EU texts are potentially compatible with various recent cultural policy debates, particularly with their strong emphasis on “wide access to and participation in culture” (EU 2014: Art. 2). In addition to the promotion of the cultural and creative economy and the cultural sector, the keywords “diversity” and “European dimension” of culture are relevant; the wording in Art. 2 of the EU document (relevant for the selection round we have analysed) is also based on a tradition-bound concept of culture, which implicitly anchors cultures in a geographical area and aims to strengthen “citizens’ sense of belonging to a

common cultural area” (ibid.: 2). The promotion of intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding is mentioned; views beyond Europe or transcultural perspectives are not explicitly envisaged. The understanding of culture presented here is political insofar as it pursues the objective of promoting European unification and understanding. With regard to the cultural and artistic programme, it is expected to have “the capacity to combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions” (ibid.: Art. 5). As we have shown, in view of this broad freedom of choice, the bid teams felt justified in focusing on political, emancipatory and sometimes provocative art and culture productions.

The slogan “culture for all” may have acquired a kind of patina, but it has by no means become obsolete. At a panel discussion on the ECoC format organised by the authors with the Nuremberg bid manager Hans-Joachim Wagner, members of the bid offices in Dresden (Stephan Hoffmann) and Hanover (Heli Meisteron), cultural adviser Gottfried Wagner and cultural studies expert Kristina Jacobsen, it became clear that such buzzwords are still justifiable, with the addition of others such as “culture by all”.²⁷ Such suggestions can be found in older texts on the subject. In the sense of a fundamental critique, figures of thought from critical theory could be applied to EcoC programmes: a culture that has become a *culture industry*, which is solely committed to achieving commercial successes, which acts as an “*anti-Enlightenment*”, and in which even audience participation can be regarded as a “*mass fraud*” (see for example Adorno 1997, orig. 1963: 338; also Schmitt 2011: 50). In a canonical publication in the field of *Critical Heritage Studies*, B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995: 369) polemically formulates the idea that cultural heritage is a mode of cultural production that “produces the local for export”. This is inaccurate as a definition of cultural heritage, but it can be seen as a productive warning against its commodification (see also Schmitt 2022). As the ECoC format is also designed to

²⁷ Panelists like H. J. Wagner in the public panel discussion “Does the city, does Europe need the Capital of Culture competition?” („*Braucht die Stadt, braucht Europa die Kulturhauptstadt?*”), organised by the DFG project documented here, 16.5.2019, Erlangen.

alternate between the local and the international, the same warning (keyword: touristification) may also be useful here.

Recent debates on culture and art are reflected in the ECoC field, which can be summarised, in simplified terms, as dichotomies:

- Aesthetically and culturally demanding versus catchy productions that are interesting and understandable for many people, possibly also with a community-building character.
- Formats which address “spectators” as individuals versus those which seek to create a sense of community between the participants
- Passively received cultural formats versus productions that involve or require the participation of the audience.
- Economically and sociologically exclusive formats versus inclusive formats that can be experienced by people interested in culture and art regardless of their financial position or social class, for example.
- Focus on cultural heritage versus contemporary cultural productions.
- Reproduction of established canons versus the undermining, breaking or expansion of such canons, including global perspectives, for example, by means of cultural and artistic dialogues between different spaces and cultural traditions, or by giving space to the cultural productions of marginalised groups or forgotten local cultural forms.
- Art and cultural activities that are clearly political versus productions that are intended to be apolitical.

The following dichotomy found in the debates about the intended programmes applies specifically to the ECoC format:

- The Capital of Culture competition as a stage for artists who are well known on the international or supra-regional level versus local or regional artists and cultural practitioners

Based on these dichotomies, a **typology of cultural (or artistic) productions** could be developed. Such a typology should take into account the extent to which a cultural production is designed to enable *spiritual experiences* or address spiritual aspects.²⁸

²⁸ A *spiritual experience* should be defined, in terms as general as possible, as one that makes it evident to the observer, or at least allows him or her to sense that behind the perceptible reality

These dichotomies should by no means be understood as meaning that one side is normatively always better and the other always worthless. The EcoC format is so complex that both sides of the contrasting pairs (with the important exception of economically and socially exclusive formats) are potentially justified. The Programme curators are faced with the challenging task of finding a convincing mix. In addition, several of the above dichotomies can be resolved dialectically in concrete cultural and artistic practice. This also applies to the relationship between “cultural heritage” and “contemporary cultural productions”. Successful contemporary cultural productions live to a large extent from the fact that they engage with *tradition* and *heritage*, reinterpret it or rub up against it – and this is precisely how they gain relevance. In the words of the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo (1931-2017), one of the innovative writers of the 20th and early 21st centuries, who campaigned for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO: “a work cannot survive the centuries to come unless it has been nurtured by the centuries that have gone before. Everything belonging just to the present is doomed to perish with it” (Goytisolo 2000: 9).

that can be represented using natural or social science methods, further levels of a more comprehensive reality exist. This may also be linked to an experience of the existential meaning of life (one's own life and/or life in general), which is one of the ways in which such a spiritual experience differs from a psychotic experience. Whether such levels of reality actually exist must remain an open question from the perspective of the social and cultural sciences. Nevertheless, not only artists of earlier eras, but also contemporary artists have referred to this in their work. It is undeniable that people have repeatedly claimed to have had such experiences. ‘Spiritual’ and ‘religious’ are not understood here as synonymous, nor as mutually exclusive. Such references can play a central, or at least important role in the interpretation and reception history of works of art, for example in the interpretation of the origins of Gothic sacred architecture or in the reception of the works of Caspar David Friedrich. Secular societies and the social systems of the social and natural sciences cannot unreservedly embrace the assertion that such experiences are possible. However, they cannot ignore the fact that artists, religious authors and authors from various disciplines refer to this. As might be expected, the EU guidelines for the ECoC format do not address these dimensions of experience. Even in mainstream cultural policy, and in ‘critical’ cultural policy debates since the 1970s, corresponding considerations hardly play a role. In the application documents for the German ECoC 2025, the Chemnitz bid book 2 in particular contains several project outlines that introduce spirituality and religion into the programme, including the ‘Prayers & Angels’ project and the European Mountain Sermon. In addition, the regional Protestant and Catholic churches joined forces and offered additional events as ‘programme partners’ of the Chemnitz Capital of Culture under the heading *KulturKirche 2025* (CultureChurch 2025) (cf. <https://kulturkirche2025.de>).

The concrete question of whether in their bid books they should focus more on *cultural heritage* or on *contemporary culture*, or rather how these should be combined, also clearly preoccupied the application teams. In the first selection round in particular, less emphasis was placed on well known cultural aspects of the city or region, and more on innovative cultural productions, new narratives and unknown history – at least in part as a response to urgent present-day problems. This applies to **Dresden**'s application, which was eliminated in the preliminary round. One interviewee, who is well established in the cultural sector and familiar with the EcoC format, admitted in a telephone interview conducted a few days after the pre-selection that she had not expected Dresden's elimination:

“Of course, it’s a bit surprising that Dresden was eliminated (...) when I read the bid book for Dresden, I think it’s a good idea (...) they had with *Neue Heimat Dresden (New Home Dresden)* (...) Some people will say that; I'm one of them, but it’s pretty risky to say that fifty per cent of a programme won’t be curated, but based on participation and citizen involvement. That’s pretty brave, (...) because anything can come out of it (...) But I still think it’s good as a concept. The fact that it didn’t convince the jury is a bit surprising for me.”²⁹

The selection panel formulated its judgement on the Dresden application as follows:

“Participation is identified as a core artistic concept, but it is not clear if – and how – the curated and non-curated parts of the programme will be linked together and transformed into a coherent and attractive proposition of European relevance and interest. A coherent artistic vision is also missing. Furthermore, the team could not explain clearly how the topic of democracy (that the panel found very important) would be addressed from a cultural and artistic content point of view” (EU 2020: 9).

Notwithstanding its criticism of the innovative element in Dresden's application, the jury's report goes on to argue – not implausibly for observers –

²⁹ Telephone interview on 19 December 2019, slightly edited for publication, and translated.

that Dresden's application made very little reference to the city's *well-known cultural heritage*:

"The panel was surprised that the city was not building on, or re-examining, its significant and world-known tangible and intangible heritage as part of its ECoC project. Regardless of the technical and legal fact that such heritage is prominently not the City's, but the State's property, it is a significant missed opportunity to develop a project of the magnitude of an ECoC without including all the city's (and the region's) major cultural assets. Finally, the panel also misses reflection upon or reference to the city's loss of the UNESCO World Heritage title" (EU 2020: 9).

Incidentally, the selection jury made a similar criticism in respect of **Hildesheim**,³⁰ which, however, had included its World Heritage sites in its first bid book: the early Romanesque St. Mary's Cathedral and St Michael's Church, as well as the Fagus Factory designed by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer in the surrounding area.

As far as **Dresden** is concerned, there was a difference in perception between the jury and the local cultural authorities: the loss of the UNESCO World Heritage title is still associated with Dresden in international expert circles. In the ECoC application process, it was only present as an anecdote. For Dresden's cultural policymakers, this loss seemed to be over and done with, no longer worth mentioning. The great challenge at the time of making the bid was primarily seen as how cultural policy and art could be used as a means of responding to the Pegida movement. Stephan Hoffmann, from the city's Office for Culture and the Protection of Monuments, who played an important role in the run-up to the application, pointed out in several discussions with the authors that, despite Dresden's rich cultural heritage – keywords: baroque royal residence city, art collections and museums, opera – a movement like Pegida had been able to emerge. Culture and cultural education offerings do not automatically immunise against resentment – an insight that has been

³⁰ On Hildesheim: "Yet the European narrative and the artistic vision need to stand out more clearly and daringly, while building up more steadily on the rich local heritage that should not be ignored" (EU 2020: 15).

confirmed many times over in the cultural history of the 19th and 20th centuries, and at that time again in Dresden.

Dresden's bid team was particularly proud of a temporary cultural installation by Syrian artist Manaf Halbouni, which was presented to the public in front of the reconstructed baroque church *Frauenkirche* on Neumarkt square in 2017 and received national attention. Three old buses were placed vertically next to each other with the help of large cranes. The installation was reminiscent of a frequently photographed situation in the city of Aleppo during the Syrian civil war, in which civilians sought shelter behind such buses. The national media showed great interest in this installation, while locally it gave rise to controversies, and the scene was depicted in the bid book (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2019: 55). Stephan Hoffmann explained this as follows in March 2019:

"I believe that the issue of the buses was also one of the early success stories for us as the EcoC office. It was very controversial. You may have noticed that on 13 February of all days, the anniversary of the bombing of Dresden, the commemoration event was disrupted. Huge protests, shouting, the mayors were shouted down, not even the pastor of the *Frauenkirche* was allowed to speak. A few days later, we as the Capital of Culture Office then invited people to a public discussion in the neighbouring transport museum. The event was packed, people had to stand outside. What happened there was quite astonishing for me, because the fronts that had formed tended to crumble in the discussion about this installation. For example, there were senior citizens who said: 'I was sitting in the cellar on 13 February '45 and I would like to remember my deceased relatives undisturbed on this day, and I find it distracting.' And there were members of the same generation who said: 'No, I was sitting in the cellar, too, and that's why I think it's right that there's an artwork here that reminds me that today people are sitting in cellars again.'"³¹

This episode shows that a conversation about political art is possible, at least on a small scale, in which hardened positions and blockades can be broken down. In addition to the ECoC office, other established cultural actors in Dresden

³¹ Interview with Stephan Hoffmann (as well as D. Klein and M. Wiemer), as part of an MA seminar led by the authors, March 2019. The quote has been slightly edited, authorised by S. Hoffmann and translated into English.

focused in the following years on confronting the rise of right-wing populism and right-wing extremism. In 2019, the State Playhouse (*Staatsschauspiel*) in Dresden premiered the play *Das blaue Wunder* (*The Blue Miracle*), which uses grotesque elements to anticipate the consequences of an AFD election victory. In 2018/2019, the German Hygiene Museum held a highly acclaimed special exhibition entitled *Rassismus. Die Erfindung von Menschenrassen* (*Racism. The invention of human races*). It showed how in the 19th and 20th centuries (pseudo-)scientific constructions of human races, which have been refuted by modern genetics, were socially instrumentalised. However, these cultural interventions in the state capital could not stop the rise of right-wing extremism, as shown by the 2024 elections in Saxony: the AFD received 30.6% of the list votes, while the far-right party *Freien Sachsen* received a further 2.2%.³² Incidentally, the AFD's share of valid votes cast in the city of Dresden (25.2%) was noticeably lower than in Chemnitz (31.9%), but significantly higher than in Leipzig (19.9%).³³ This shows the different size of this socio-cultural and political milieu in the three cities.

³² <https://wahlen.sachsen.de/landtagswahl-2024-wahlergebnisse.php> (accessed 11/09/2024).

³³ Own calculations using https://wahlen.sachsen.de/download/Landtag/statistik-sachsen_LW24_vorlErgebnisse.xlsx (retrieved on 11.9.2024).

9. A look at the winning city of Chemnitz

In line with our chosen approach of not conducting “winner research”, we have used many examples from other candidate cities in the above chapters. However, we do not intend to exclude Chemnitz, the Capital of Culture 2025, from our analysis. In this chapter we will outline Chemnitz’s path to success. The case of this city is particularly interesting, irrespective of its having won the title.

Chemnitz’s bid was largely motivated by the long-standing regional competition between it and the two other, larger and much better-known Saxon cities of Dresden and Leipzig, which, each with a different profile, had established themselves as cities of culture over the centuries. The state capital and former royal residence city of **Dresden** meets the classic expectations of a city of culture with its iconic baroque city skyline on the banks of the Elbe (despite losing its World Heritage title in 2009). Dresden’s landmarks were rebuilt, in part during the GDR era, following their destruction during the Second World War. In addition, there is the spectacular reconstruction of the baroque *Frauenkirche* and the city’s renowned museums and art collections such as the *Old Masters* art gallery with Rafael’s *Sistine Madonna*. **Leipzig** was able to build its reputation as a city of culture with the names of famous artists who worked there, such as Johann Sebastian Bach, with its famous book fair, and, in addition, with its well-known contemporary art scene in the wake of GDR realism, concentrated in the premises of the *Alte Baumwollspinnerei* (Old Cotton Mill). Firmly anchored in the collective German memory is the topos that the prayers for peace and the demonstrations that started at Leipzig’s St. Nicholas Church were central to the peaceful revolution in the GDR in 1989. **Chemnitz** was known as the “Saxon Manchester” in the 19th century due to its high number of industries (Schäfer 2020, among others), was largely destroyed during the Second World War, and was renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt during the GDR era in 1953 (up to 1990). In 2007, Chemnitz was officially designated as the “City of Modernism”, a reference not to the reconstruction following the Second World War, which was guided by socialist urban planning principles, so much as to the buildings in the classical modernist style that characterise parts of the city’s appearance. In the mid-2010s, both Dresden and Leipzig were considering

making a bid for the title of European Capital of Culture in 2025. This motivated key local players in Chemnitz, which had always been overshadowed and outcompeted by these two cities, to also make a bid. In an interview (2018) with one of the authors, Christoph Dittrich, General Director of the Chemnitz City Theatre, recalls the beginnings of the bid idea:

“At the time, I heard that Dresden was considering it [making a bid for the ECoC title, T.S.]. And I heard that Leipzig was considering it. It was precisely this combination that triggered an intuition in me, here in Chemnitz where I work. There is a bit of competition between these Saxon sister cities. So I had this intuition and I said: Dresden and Leipzig are competing – which of them will make it? I said to myself, the answer is obvious: this is a chance for Chemnitz. (...) Of course, I was already familiar with it [the ECoC format] from a distance (...) The decisive factor was this combination, the feeling that here a need meets a necessity. (...) And so I went to the mayor and [told her about my idea] (...) It was actually a coincidence that Ferenc Csák became the head of the department of culture (...) As a secretary of state in Hungary, he had accompanied Pécs’s application [for the EcoC title]. And of course it had a totally catalytic effect that such a person was suddenly there when this idea started to be discussed here.”³⁴

The industrial city of Chemnitz was therefore able to step out of the shadow of the two larger Saxon cities of Dresden and Leipzig, which had a much clearer public profile as cities of culture. The bid was launched under Mayor Barbara Ludwig (SPD) and Ferenc Csák, the head of the culture department. Chemnitz was initially regarded as anything but a favourite, more of an underdog among the potential candidate cities, or, in the wording of the regional newspaper *Freie Presse* (2018), as a “Cinderella”. However, Chemnitz’s own ambitions became apparent at the latest when, in November 2017, two months after a comparable format organised by Dresden, the state capital, entitled “*Konferenz der Konkurrenten*” (*Conference of the Competitors*), Chemnitz also invited its potential competitors to a conference entitled “*Stat(d)t Kultur: Chemnitz 2025*” (*Urban/*

³⁴ Interview with Ch. Dittrich, October 2018. The interview has been slightly edited, authorised by Ch. Dittrich, translated into English.

alternative culture: Chemnitz 2025), at which the ECoC format in general was discussed and initial ideas for a Chemnitz bid were presented (Figs. 2.1 and 2.2).

After weeks of far-right riots in Chemnitz in August and September 2018 (Fig. 2.3), the question arose for us as researchers, but also for observers in general, as to how the Chemnitz application team would react to the situation, in addition to politicians and civil society.

From the research diary. Informal telephone call with a person from the Chemnitz application office, September 2018:

The person said something like this: We are all shocked by what has happened here. At the time of our previous meetings and events, nothing like this had happened or no one realised how much people care about these issues [e.g. immigration, T. S.]. My personal opinion: listen more [I think: like what the Saxon State Minister for Integration has often said]; listen to what people care about. – The person continued: But I know people from my more distant circle of acquaintances who say they are not right-wing, but who were nevertheless on the side of the rightists at the demonstrations. Because they said it was the only way to make a statement against the politicians. – I reject that. But the majority who are not rightist have not yet taken to the streets.

As the bid team, we want to stick to Chemnitz's previous motto "AUFBrüche. Opening Minds. Creating Spaces" for the Capital of Culture bid, which is even more appropriate now. And probably also listen more to what people care about and take this up.³⁵

There was a recognisable sense of uncertainty and even helplessness among those responsible for the bid in Chemnitz as to how this changed situation would affect the application process. The fact that it is possible to respond to such disturbing situations as the far-right riots (which met with approval, or least no distancing, in certain sections of the Chemnitz population) *with cultural means* was shown by the "*Wir sind mehr*" (We are more) concert organised at short notice on 3 September 2018 with well-known German acts (including *Die Toten Hosen*, *Kraftclub*, *K.I.Z.*). This was followed a few days later by an open-air event entitled "*For Diversity and Tolerance*" organised by the Chemnitz Theatre, whose

³⁵ Reproduced from notes taken immediately after the interview and edited for publication, with anonymisation of the person.

artistic director, as described above, had played a key role in encouraging the Chemnitz Capital of Culture bid (Fig. 2.4). The artistic focus here was on classical music, supplemented, for example, by a puppet play in which a puppet representing the Chemnitz-born, politically engaged writer Stefan Heym (1913-2001) commented on the racist riots.

The question of whether Chemnitz was still suitable as a candidate city was countered early on by the local EcoC programme committee with a “now more than ever” positioning:

“The events of the last few days have not jeopardised Chemnitz’s bid to become the European Capital of Culture in 2025. On the contrary: the process is more important than ever – for a cosmopolitan, tolerant and democratic society” (Chemnitz2025 [2018]).

Christoph Dittrich, General Director of Chemnitz Theatre, put it similarly in an interview held in September 2018:

“So at this point in time, I really think that there is an enormous increase in strength. I haven’t met anyone who has doubted the application in any way, instead everyone has said: Now more than ever. And whether it’s a coincidence or not, our *Brüche* (*ruptures*) or *AUFBrüche* (*new beginnings*) [the motto envisaged at the time, T. S.], this is such a rupture. It’s something that could have happened in a different place. The way we process it, handle it: that’s the crucial thing. Not that it happened, but how we deal with it. And that is a story we can tell Europe in the same way as the emigration of sixty thousand people following reunification, or the destruction of the city and the construction of a model socialist city: this repeated rupture and uprooting (...) how we deal with it. This will be incorporated into our endeavours to become the European Capital of Culture.”³⁶

Increasingly, the racist riots were perceived not as an obstacle but as a *strategic momentum*, as an *opportunity* for the Chemnitz bid. “Chemnitz has a strong theme. We are envious,” as the head of the ECoC office of a competing candidate

³⁶ Interview with Ch. Dittrich, October 2018. The quote has been slightly edited, authorised by Ch. Dittrich, and translated.

city put it with surprising honesty in a round of talks in Berlin at the end of September 2018.³⁷ During the same event, a representative of Chemnitz's bid office said that the city desired "no sympathy bonus" and did not want to make "the events" the "main theme" of the bid. This changed with the publication of the second bid book. In mid-September 2018, around a week before the aforementioned talks in Berlin, the then Mayor of Chemnitz Barbara Ludwig said at a public panel discussion, quoted here from an article in the regional newspaper *Freie Presse*: "As difficult and as painful as it is, we can make use of this situation" (Fischer 2018).

The public presentation of Chemnitz's first bid book in September 2019, around a year after the riots, was an intermediate step in terms of both time and content. When Barbara Ludwig reviewed the application process to date in a speech that sounded both confident and authentic, she only briefly touched on what had brought Chemnitz into the international headlines. This was then continued by Ferenc Csák, head of Chemnitz's culture department. He showed in his presentation a double page of the first bid book on which two images are strikingly juxtaposed: on the left, a photo of a demonstration organised by the far right in Chemnitz on 27 August 2018, with police in the foreground, and on the right, protests by the so-called Yellow Vest movement in front of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in the same year (Fig. 2.6). Pre-iconographic³⁸ elements connecting the two images were white clouds of smoke and the fact that a steward belonging to the Chemnitz demonstrators was also wearing a yellow jacket. The illustrations placed in dialogue introduced the obligatory chapter on the European dimension of the Chemnitz bid. They were intended to "stage" the "events" of 2018 in such a way that they would be understood by the selection panel not just as a local problem, but as a supra-regional issue,³⁹ or, interpreted in the context of the bid, as a European dimension. This can be interpreted as a

³⁷ Quoted from own notes taken during the event. The discussion in Berlin for the German candidate cities was organised on 24.09.2018 by the Institute of Cultural Policy at the University of Hildesheim under the programmatic title, which in retrospect was only partially justified, "One will win – and all will benefit. Think tank and dialogue workshop of the German candidate cities for European Capital of Culture 2025".

³⁸ Following Erwin Panofsky's art analysis scheme (1978, orig. 1939).

³⁹ Based on notes made during F. Csák's speech.

skilful strategic de-localisation, but also as a dethematisation of their racist character. The French Yellow Vest demonstrators had social and economic political demands, while in Chemnitz, an act of violence was instrumentalised for a far-right political agenda. In the first Chemnitz bid book, after a brief analysis of the situation, a cultural response to the question concerning the bid's "European dimension" was attempted:

"For an urban society that views itself as overwhelmingly homogeneous, cultural diversity and the often problematic consequences of flight and migration pose serious challenges. In Chemnitz we have seen how right-wing populist and nationalist forces exploit a particular mixture of public sensitivities and political circumstances to create a xenophobic climate and foster fear. The reactions to the violent confrontation that took place in August of 2018 show how easily anger and resentment can be mobilised. This is why Chemnitz2025 is placing special emphasis on encounters between people, on intercultural dialogue and social interaction" (Stadt Chemnitz 2019 [Bid book I]: 26).

Together with four other cities, Chemnitz made it to the final phase of the competition; its regional rival Dresden was surprisingly eliminated. Yet at the start of the final phase, Chemnitz was more of a Cinderella than a new favourite. A few days after the announcement of the jury's decision in the pre-selection, the head of the Nuremberg bid, Hans Joachim Wagner, said at a panel discussion in the Orpheum hall in Nuremberg (Fig. 6.14), when asked whether it would be more difficult for Nuremberg in the second round of the bid: "It's a very emotional situation Nuremberg is now [in the final selection round] competing with other cities that we hadn't expected to be in the running (...) Now it's a case of Hanover or Nuremberg"⁴⁰ – in other words, not Chemnitz.

In Chemnitz, it took pressure from civil society and members of the university, as well as external criticism by the jury, to make the team adopt a more offensive attitude to the racist far-right riots of 2018. This advice was followed in the second Chemnitz bid book (Stadt Chemnitz 2020). Right at the beginning, two pages (out of the maximum one hundred allowed) were reserved

⁴⁰ Reconstructed according to notes taken by a student project member (L. Ullinger).

for large-format reproductions of two articles from the international press (*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*) reporting “about Chemnitz”. The fact that the bull was thus, metaphorically speaking, taken by the horns may be assumed to be a reason for the success of Chemnitz in the competition. At the same time, the images and the text of the second Chemnitz bid book are lighter and easier to read compared to the heaviness of the long texts in the Nuremberg bid book (despite their undeniable intellectual density). In addition to convincing arguments, there are key passages in the Chemnitz book that sound like the elegant rhetoric of international culture advisers, such as the praise of “maker-space.eu” (ibid.: 4). Such rhetoric is clearly represented in a thematic illustration naming two out of four “strategic ECoC goals” as “[f]oster a trans-local European maker identity” and “build critical creative maker communities” (ibid.: 10).

The new motto chosen for the second Chemnitz bid book, the wordplay “C the unseen” (C standing both for Chemnitz and the homophone “see”), is a cleverly designed allusion to the city’s Cinderella position mentioned above. A comparable message can be found in a brochure published by the city of Magdeburg in 2014 (!) with regard to a possible ECoC application: “Unscheinbar sein [–] sichtbar werden” (*Being inconspicuous [–] becoming visible*) (Stadt Magdeburg 2014: 2), showing that similar linguistic and visual motifs can recur in the ECoC cosmos.

Figures relating to bidding activities: City of Zittau



Fig. 7.1: A view of the city of Zittau's Capital of Culture office.



Fig. 7.2: Interview with representatives of Zittau's bid to become European Capital of Culture, March 2019. In the centre is Zittau's mayor, Thomas Zenker.



Fig. 8: Through to the next round. A group photo featuring delighted and/or relieved representatives from the candidate cities and organisers of the nationwide selection process, following the announcement of the pre-selection results (Berlin, 12 December 2019).

All photographs in this volume (except for excerpts from bid books): Thomas Schmitt.

10. Conclusion I: “One will win – and all will benefit”? – A critical view of an ECoC ideologeme

Prominent ECoC advisers and representatives of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States (*Kulturstiftung der Länder*) repeatedly emphasised the need for all competing cities to have a *plan B*: a concept for the statistically much more likely case, which the bid teams had to largely ignore for motivational reasons, that their city did not win the Capital of Culture title. The core idea of such a plan B would be, somewhat simplified, that the cities do not simply bury their cultural ambitions in the event of their bid being unsuccessful, but continue to focus on the planned long-term cultural projects within the limits of the financially possible. This ideologeme was taken up in a condensed form in the title of the think tank and dialogue workshop entitled “One will win – and all will benefit” organised in Berlin in 2018 by the Institute of Cultural Policy of the University of Hildesheim for the candidate cities. Seen in retrospect, was this ideologeme justified?

Immediately after the jury’s decision in both selection rounds, the great disappointment of central protagonists in the losing cities was evident. Some of them were unable or unwilling to hide their tears, for example after the announcement of the 2019 pre-selection result in Berlin: very understandable reactions in view of the personal effort that key stakeholders put into the application process. This shows the downside of a competition in which many people push themselves to their personal limits for their city over a period of months – not unlike sporting contests or academic competitions.

A prominent stakeholder from a bidding city described the situation retrospectively as follows in an interview with the researchers at the end of 2021:

“Of course, the lockdown [during the coronavirus pandemic] affected culture in quite a different way, but I think in [*name of the city*] people are tending to hide behind the idea that the lockdown has affected culture – and a lot of what seemed possible as a plan B, or even without making a bid for the Capital of Culture title, has now been abandoned. So there’s still a collective feeling of

being offended or sad or rejected by the jury, which is lying on our cultural politics like a sort of mildew.”⁴¹

The press coverage in the losing cities revealed a sense of disillusionment in many cases, combined with questions as to why their own bids failed or whether Chemnitz had actually deserved to win. But what has become of the processes initiated in the losing cities? Looking back, initial assessments can now be made. After a certain period of time, at least in some cities, and to varying degrees, there was a willingness to continue pursuing some of the key themes of their bid under new auspices. In **Nuremberg**, this concerns the question of what to do with the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds (a “difficult heritage”⁴², to use the jargon of heritage studies), which had gradually developed into a focal point of Nuremberg’s application. In the second bid book, for example, the Congress Hall was described as a “monstrous building that becomes a birthplace for contemporary art” (Stadt Nürnberg 2020: 22). Following the failure of the bid, plans for a “cultural re-use” (Stadt Nürnberg 2024: 1) of the site were further developed and in 2024 the city council decided, among other things, that the torso of the Congress Hall should serve as an interim venue for the Nuremberg State Theatre, at least during the renovation of the opera house, expected to take several years. While the regional newspapers *Nürnberger Nachrichten* and *Nürnberger Zeitung* repeatedly supported such a “cultural re-use” in their reporting and commentaries (cf. Metzger 2022: 4), the regional association *Geschichte für Alle* (History for All) opposed it. The “empty” inner courtyard, i.e. not an inner courtyard transformed for use as an opera house, is a “place of learning and a monument”, as well as a historical “source”; it should remain empty: in its form, dimensions and authenticity, the Congress Hall “documents the claim to world power of the Nazi architecture and the failure of this gigantic construction project” (Metzger 2022: 4).

Cultural valorisation may be seen as a retrospective justification of the Nazi buildings. Although the city of Nuremberg has always acknowledged its special

⁴¹ The quote has been slightly edited, the interviewee anonymised, and the quote translated.

⁴² Cf. Macdonald (2009).

political responsibility, the question arises as to whether cultural enjoyment is appropriate in what is a central testimony to Nazi representative architecture. What does it mean, for example, when the Congress Hall is likely to be praised in internet forums in the near future as a fantastic event location? We also need to consider the role that national and international attention played in the rushed, non-participatory decision-making process for this prestige project.

The present authors are sceptical of any automatic assumption that art and cultural productions can be used to counter the symbolism inscribed in these stone monuments to Nazi ideology.

The case of Nuremberg shows that pursuing the plans outlined in the application is not desirable *per se*. In general, it can be stated that several effects can overlap with regard to the medium-term impact on the city of an unsuccessful ECoC bid:

- Increased *competence in the field of cultural policy* among numerous stakeholders; cultural *events* from the application process that are unforgettable; memories of what is possible in terms of urban and cultural policy.
- Increased *networking* between urban and cultural policy stakeholders in the city and the region.
- An elaborated *long-term cultural strategy* for the city, which had to be developed as part of the application process.
- *Disillusionment*, disappointment and fatigue, even some time after losing the competition.

It was interesting to see that some of the candidate cities managed to make headlines in 2025 with “major events” (Häußermann/Siebel 1993). In the summer of 2025, Dresden hosted the *Finals 2025*, a “top-class sporting event” in athletics, following the announcement in 2023 that Dresden had been awarded the Finals 2025.⁴³ Some of the competitions took place in Dresden city centre against a historic backdrop; the competitions were broadcast on public television. In addition to this coverage of ‘positive’ events, there were also sad ones. At the beginning of 2025, Magdeburg was still in shock after an attack on its Christmas

⁴³ www.diefinals.de/news/Die-Finals-2025-Dresden-104 (last access 2026-02-10).

market shortly before Christmas 2024, which left six people dead and several hundred injured.

11. Conclusion II: Productive paradoxes of the ECoC format?

This publication has two central objectives. Firstly, it is intended to contribute to the conceptual development of social and cultural science research on the ECoC format, based on empirical material from the German bidding process for the title of European Capital of Culture 2025. This is linked to the second objective: to provide readers with selected, “thickly described” (following Geertz 1973) insights into different facets of the ECoC selection process, and to conduct further analyses on this basis. In a multi-level governance analysis, we have revealed different interests, resources and constraints of various actor groups and stakeholders in the application process. In conceptual terms, we have presented a systematisation of ideal-typical readings and implementations of the ECoC format and discussed the consequences of their co-existence for the relative success of the ECoC idea.

On the basis of our analysis, a number of paradoxes can be identified in the ECoC format. It is precisely the coexistence of these different interpretations that makes it widely accepted: that is a first, at least apparent paradox. We argue that its relative success can be explained by the diversity of (conceptual) connectivities that it offers. Stakeholders with different urban and cultural political interests can unite behind the common goal of an ECoC bid and bundle synergies. The current governance structure of the format with selection of the winning cities by a “panel of independent experts” potentially opens up, during the bidding process, otherwise unknown spaces of freedom in local cultural politics and for the development of cultural productions with a high artistic, participatory and/or political value. The quality of the competition, the level of local urban and cultural planning, and of the cultural or artistic productions thus depend to a large extent on the urban and cultural expertise of the selection panel – or at least on what the stakeholders *anticipate* as its expertise and cultural orientation. However, the discussion in chapter 7 of the critical role of international expert networks reveals a weak point in the implementation of the ECoC format that to date has received little attention: there is a tendency for international cultural advisers to drive the cities that employ them into formats and formulas that are ultimately interchangeable. A further paradox thus lies in

the expectation that an internationally relevant cultural programme can be developed from the local resources of a city; this paradox can be resolved – and this can also be justified theoretically – in cultural *practices*, because local events and situations can have supra-local relevance, or at least point to wider contexts. Another paradox is that internationally networked cultural advisers claim a special role for themselves in the bid activities of the cities, as local bodies. Yet another arises from tension between the fact, on the one hand, that the EU bodies expect the local population to be involved in the application process and that local cultural practitioners demand the right to participate, while, on the other hand, the rules require an international/ European dimension which means, at least according to common belief, that the bid process must be curated (see for example the discussion on the Dresden application in chapter 8). Moreover, the application teams, because they are competing against other cities, like to save some aspects of their bid programme as a surprise for their presentation to the jury. This would not be possible with 100 per cent local participation, which would inevitably result in complete transparency. The ECoC selection process shares another paradox with other competitions: it is apparent that the bid teams have to give their all if they want to win the competition. At the same time, they know that the statistical probability of their city winning is significantly lower than that of losing. When the competition is over, they need to appear as good losers, not let themselves be paralysed by their disappointment, and find the energy to implement parts of their planned cultural programme as their *plan B*.

The appropriateness of the jury's decision in favour of Chemnitz is not questioned by the authors of this book. Although the critical eye of the social and cultural sciences can identify weaknesses in the Chemnitz application and preparation process, the development it went through was nevertheless remarkable. Driven by a committed and stubborn civil society, those responsible in Chemnitz took on the unintended additional task of countering the city's social upheavals resulting from the racist riots through the means of art, culture, community projects and social and sustainable urban development. The claim once made by Dresden that these local debates have an exemplary, and ultimately national or Europe-wide relevance was inherited by the neighbouring

city of Chemnitz with even greater force. The benchmark for the success of the “Chemnitz 2025” year is therefore not the extent to which the programme was executed smoothly, or impressive images of the opening event, or whether there was “enough Europe” in the programme,⁴⁴ but whether serious answers were found to the most pressing questions in Chemnitz and beyond. Just a few months after the end of the Capital of Culture year, it still remains to be seen whether the ECoC year was able to bring about lasting change in urban society and regional political culture.

⁴⁴ Cf. the 2023 interim report of the selection panel which recommends the city of Chemnitz “[to] reinforce the European dimension mind-set” (ECoC expert panel 2023: 12).

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The 'European Capital of Culture' format is regarded as the EU's flagship cultural initiative. A total of eight German cities took part in a selection process for the title for the year 2025, which was ultimately awarded to Chemnitz. Many cultural events and public discussions preceded the submission of their bid books by the cities concerned. This publication provides insights into the selection process, the cities' application activities and the cultural and political debates. It shows how different interpretations of the EU format intertwine to contribute to its success.