

Participatory Practices in European Capitals of Culture: The Case of Timisoara 2021

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I. Introduction

Timisoara is the second Romanian city to have been designated a European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Unlike Sibiu ECoC 2007, Timisoara's candidacy and the implementation of the project were prepared and delivered under the new ECoC framework that applies starting with 2020. This framework provides more explicit selection criteria and indicators of impact evaluation regarding contributions to long-term strategy, capacity to deliver, cultural and artistic content, the European dimension, outreach and management. This paper will focus on the participatory segments of Timisoara's programme that aim to sustainably transform the city. Two specific ECoC objectives are relevant in this regard: widening access and participation and strengthening the capacity of the cultural sector.

After introducing the concept of participation, in this paper we will discuss the shift towards participation in the ECoC programme; then, we will depict and discuss the participatory practices applied by Timisoara 2021 in preparation of the cultural year.

II. Participation and the ECoC programme

A. *Understandings of participation*

In the last 50 years, the topic of public participation has been tackled by various conceptual or theoretical approaches²: management theory,

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² T. Webler and S. Tuler, "Unlocking the Puzzle of Public Participation," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 22:3 (2002): 179-189.

collaborative learning, decision analysis, procedural justice, theories of democracy or evaluation studies. In his seminal study on citizen participation, Arnstein³ proposed a typology of participation, meant to shed light on a provocative topic: even though everyone is applauding participation as a “corner-stone of democracy”⁴, difficulty arises when speaking about who does or does not benefit from it and why. Drawing on examples from urban renewal and antipoverty programmes, Arnstein’s typology is based on the dynamic equilibrium between the powerless and the powerholders. The typology was described in a ladder pattern, each rung corresponding to the extent of citizen power: from non-participation (manipulation, therapy), through diverse degrees of tokenism (information, consultation, placation) and finally, to degrees of shared power with the citizens (partnership, delegated decision-making power, citizen control). Adapted participation ladders were further developed (Table 1⁵).

Table 1. Participation ladder

Participation Form	Citizens’ Roles	Governments’ Roles
1. Self-governance	Initiators, self-governance of communities or groups	Supporter (financially or offering facilities)
2. Partnership	Equal partners, co-producing plans and policies	Equal partners, co-producing plans and policies
3. Delegated	Delegated co-decision makers, within policy lines previously set by governmental actors	Delegated co-decision makers, leaving lesser abstract decisions to (groups of) citizens
4. Open advice	Advisors, all kind of problem definition and potential solutions may	Requesting advice by formulating open questions

³ S. R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 35:4 (1969): 216-224.

⁴ Ibidem, 216.

⁵ Source: L. Schaap and A. Edwards, “Participatory democracy,” in *Encyclopedia of Governance*, ed. Mark Bevir (Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007), 695.

	come to the fore during the policy making process	
5. Consultation	Consultant, advising on rather closed set of questions, formulated by governmental actors	Consulter, asking advice on limited and controlled questions.

Participation is one of the key principles of good governance, according to the policy documents of the European Union.⁶ Along with openness, accountability, effectiveness and coherence, participation contributes to “the quality, relevance and effectiveness of EU policies [as well as to the] confidence in the end result and in the institutions which deliver policies”⁷. One condition is necessary: ensuring an inclusive approach, based on wide participation “throughout the policy chain — from conception to implementation”⁸. The European Capital of Culture programme, part of the cultural policies of the European Union, places increasing importance on participation.

B. Participation in the ECoC context

Participation has become an increasingly important theme in the European Capital of Culture programme. Since its inception in 1985, the ECoC programme evolved towards a comprehensive understanding of culture, as a panacea for solving all sorts of economic, cultural and social problems of a city. Throughout the four generations of ECoCs described in the literature⁹, the goals of the programme changed, from instrumentalising high culture mainly for image and economic gains for cities, towards a democratised and inclusive approach of culture, pursuing cultural and social impacts, both for the city and for its citizens. The shift towards emphasising participation in the ECoC bids had occurred in the 2010s, when “a clear focus and a systematic approach to social regeneration”¹⁰, was added to the general goal of economic urban

⁶ European Commission, “European Governance: A White Paper”, (COM/2001/428).

⁷ European Commission, “European Governance: A White Paper”, 7.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ M. Sassatelli, *Becoming Europeans. Cultural identities and cultural policies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁰ E. Tomarchi, L. Hansen F. Bianchini, “Problematising the question of participation in Capitals of Culture,” *Participations, Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15-2 (2018): 158.

regeneration of ECoC cities. This shift corresponds to the growing interest in assuring sustainability for the ECoC title, if sustainability is to be understood as community building¹¹, in a more citizen-centred approach¹², rather than an economic-centred one.

Even prior to the 2010s, pioneering projects were developed pursuing cultural and social inclusion goals. Rotterdam ECoC 2001 created a programme which placed cultural inclusion in its fundamental concepts as an emerging form of practice. Palmer/Rae Report observed that there was a burgeoning rhetoric relating to inclusion and social change, which developed since then¹³. Graz ECoC 2003 manifested interest for including people who were not ordinary art consumers (children, young people, disabled people, minorities, socially disadvantaged people) in the creation of projects. For Liverpool ECoC 2008 cultural vibrancy, access and participation were key themes for evaluating the impact of the programme. Since then, most host cities have stressed the importance of engaging local people in the planning and delivery of the year, as well as building audiences for activities from within the local population.¹⁴

When approaching participation in the context of ECoC programmes, Tomarchi et al. observed that the concept of ‘participation’ is understood according to at least four different meanings - audience, co-creation, governance and volunteering:

Firstly, participation may mean engagement in cultural events, intended as audience engagement by spectators. This concerns in particular audience development policies. Secondly, the concept is understood as active participation or co-creating, in which the citizens themselves create cultural content. In this case it deals with encouraging individual creativity, through the involvement of local people in community arts projects where they are enabled to express

¹¹ C. Turşie, “Religion, multiculturalism and social inclusion in the European Capitals of Culture,” *Journal of Freedom of Conscience* 17 (2019): 522-538.

¹² E. Tomarchi, L. Hansen and F. Bianchini, “Problematising the question of participation in Capitals of Culture”, 157.

¹³ Palmer/Rae Associates, “European Cities and Capitals of Culture – City Reports. Study prepared for the European Commission,” Part. I (2004), 133.

¹⁴ B. Garcia and T. Cox, “European Capitals of Culture: Success Strategies and Long-term Effects, Study request by the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education,” Brussels (2013): 91.

themselves and develop their cultural skills, and through co-creation of cultural contents and projects, based on open calls and micro-funding schemes. Thirdly, participation may be understood in relation to the governance processes (...), where local communities are encouraged to contribute to the design of the overall event or specific projects. Fourthly, volunteering might also be seen as a form of participation in which citizens engage in the delivery of the events. In many ECoCs, volunteer programmes have been emphasised as one of the successes, by not only providing the necessary free workforce for the mega event, but also by creating pride and public engagement.¹⁵

Spread along the timeframe of an ECoC, from the bidding phase to planning the programme, to its implementation and legacy, different understandings of participation prevail.

In the bidding phase, participation understood as ‘consultation’ has become business as usual for ECoCs. The process of constructing a successful bid for an ECoC candidate city involves diverse activities of deep and direct contact with diverse strata of the local population (focus groups, opinion polls, public debates), in order to identify best the local needs and specificities as arguments for an authentic candidacy narrative. An additional step in this regard was taken recently by Zittau ECoC 2025 candidate: once the bid book was put in place, a local referendum was organised in 2019, to approve the candidacy. Even if the practice is still consultative, at the bottom of the participation ladder, the referendum was an awareness-raising tool (facilitated by the size of the city).

During the planning phase, diverse activities of audience development, volunteering development as well as smaller scale co-creation projects are envisioned, in preparation for the cultural year. It has been argued by Jancovich and Hansen that changes occur from the bid to the delivery phase¹⁶, producing a limitation to the traditional narrow focus on audience numbers (providing quantitative evidence necessary to justify public spending) rather than on innovative

¹⁵ E. Tomarchi, L. Hansen and F. Bianchini, “Problematizing the question of participation in Capitals of Culture”, 157.

¹⁶ L. Jancovich and L. Hansen, “Rethinking participation in the Aarhus as European Capital of Culture 2017 project,” *Cultural Trends* 27:3 (2018): 173-186.

participatory practices of decision-making and co-creation. An expression of a superior rung of participation was represented by the participatory budgeting project put in place by Aarhus ECoC 2017 (“Rethink the Village”) or the Wrocław ECoC 2015 microgrants scheme. The microgrants programme of Wrocław ECoC 2015 provided 115 grants of up to 5,000 zloty (about €1,175) for individuals, informal groups, NGOs, home-owner associations, social co-operatives, church institutions, religious organisations and other similar groups to implement their own cultural activities¹⁷. Still, the quantum of the grants, limited the scale of possible projects. The lack of appropriate public funding for cultural projects was managed in the case of Umeå ECoC 2014, by an open-source approach of co-creation, where proposed community projects competed for financing, under the pre-condition of available co-funding, hence limiting the eligible participants¹⁸. A successful case of ECoC legacy in terms of “participatory governance”¹⁹ is represented by Lille ECoC 2004, through ‘Lille 3000’, the cultural agency that was created from the ECoC²⁰.

The following part of this paper analyses the participatory practices developed by Timisoara ECoC 2021, during the bidding, planning and implementation phase, one year in advance of the ECoC title.

III. The case of Timisoara 2021

The most important legacy of Timisoara 2021, apart from investments in cultural infrastructure, is envisioned to be the recovered “spirit” of the city: a competitive cultural and creative sector and empowered citizens who participate in the cultural life of the city. In a retrospective

¹⁷ European Commission, “Ex-post Evaluation of the 2016 European Capitals of Culture, Final Report. A study prepared for the European Commission by Ecorys and the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services (CSES)” (2017): 8.

¹⁸ C. Hudson, L. Sandberg and U. Schmauch, “The co-creation (of) culture? The case of Umeå, European Capital of Culture 2014,” *European Planning Studies* 25:9 (2017): 1538-1555.

¹⁹ S. Nagy, “Framing culture: Participatory governance in the European Capitals of Culture programme,” *Participations. Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15:2 (2018): 243-262.

²⁰ P. Bosredon and T. Perrin, “Lille 2004: Effects and Legacy. Perspectives on a Memorable ECoC,” in *Transforming Cities, Paradigms and potentials of Urban Development within the “European Capital of Culture.”* eds. Wolfgang Schneider and Kristina Jacobsen (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2019), 166.

perspective, different understandings of participation are introduced in the bid book, covering the whole policy cycle, even the evaluation:

- 2022 – audience participation in the communication and evaluation of impacts
- 2021 – highlights of the cultural programme broadening and deepening experiences of regional and international audiences
- 2020 – activities with focus on participative production (and international participation)
- 2018- 2019 – focus on building the capacity of cultural operators to develop audiences; engaged local audience participating in programme preparation
- 2017 – audience engagement, pilot programmes
- 2016 – final bid book
- 2015 – final concept of the bid, public consultations
- 2012-2014 – public consultations, debates on several concepts of the bid
- 2011 – legal founding of the Association Timisoara European Capital of Culture.

We will further retrieve and discuss the participatory practices applied by Timisoara 2021 until the present time, during the bidding and first phases of implementation.

A. Participatory practices in the Bidding phase

During the period 2011-2016, the city of Timisoara prepared its candidacy for the ECoC title. The Association Timisoara European Capital of Culture 2021, responsible for managing the bid, was created in 2011, following an initiative of Timisoara Municipality. In 2014 Timisoara became the first Romanian city to develop a long-term Cultural Strategy, following a participative process. The Selection Panel, which awarded the 2021 ECoC title to Timisoara, “noted the broad participative approach used in the creation of the cultural strategy 2014-2024.”²¹ The process of formulating the strategy represented in numbers: “319 individuals directly involved in 14 focus-groups, one participatory planning workshop and multiple interviews; 3 debates on themes of

²¹ The European Capital of Culture 2021 in Romania, “The Selection Panel’s Final Report,” (Bucharest, October 2016): 14.

European relevance with the participation of professionals from Hungary, France, Spain, Italy/Belgium, Holland, Serbia and Romania; several meetings with local councillors, members of Timisoara European Capital for Culture 2021 Association.”²²

The bid book was prepared in a similar participatory approach, involving both local and external expertise. During the consultative process of defining a concept for the candidacy, two different concepts were launched and debated: “Revolutionary” in 2012 (the role of Timisoara in the Romanian anti-communist Revolution) and “Cultural Corridors” (the Bega river, the metaphor of water as a connector) in 2014. Inviting citizens’ opinions, like informing and consulting them on the candidacy concept, can be a legitimate step toward their full participation.

The identification of the city and the citizens’ needs represented the key theme of a series of workshops, as well as in a sociological survey, which took place in 2013. External experts were invited to share their experience as former staff members of other ECoCs: Ektor Tsatsoulis (Paphos 2017), Neil Peterson (Liverpool 2008), Rolf Noras (Stavanger 2008) and Ulrich Fuchs (Marseille 2013). A new candidacy concept—the final one— was proposed and debated in 2015 and the bid book was finalised in July 2016, after several other rounds of public meetings with local cultural operators. “Thursday meetings” and “Cultural Cafes”²³ were organised, consisting in public meetings with cultural stakeholders and opportunities to improve the proposed cultural programme.

A sociological research on “Cultural barriers in Timisoara” was produced in 2016, following the methodology of the Special Eurobarometer 399, questioning to what extent will the title produce new and sustainable opportunities for diverse categories of citizens (youth, volunteers, marginalised and deprived populations, minorities).

B. Understandings of participation in the bid book

Timisoara’s bid stands under the theme “Shine your Light- Light up your city”. The concept “uses the universal metaphor of light, which in

²² Metru Cub, “Timisoara is the first Romanian city to develop a long-term cultural strategy” (2014).

²³ Timisoara European Capital of Culture Candidate city, “Final Activity Report,” (Timisoara, 2016): 9.

Timisoara has particular added meanings [...] Through the ECoC title, the ‘spirit’ of Timisoara could be reignited.”²⁴ The programme is structured as a “‘journey’ from loneliness to togetherness”²⁵, across three “territories”: “People”, “Places” and “Connections”. At the centre of the scheme is the “Power Station”, a capacity building project, meant to empower citizens. The “stations” and “trails” along the “journey” have been carefully designed to facilitate the involvement of the local population beyond mere spectators.

Against this proposal, the Selection Panel who awarded the ECoC title to Timisoara in October 2016 appreciated the “clear and strong process of community participation, including the needs of the cultural sector as well as cross-border and international partners”²⁶. It was intended that 75% of all projects to be co-produced with partners from Europe. It was also “strongly appreciated the importance and clear vision of people (culture and creative agents, audiences and decision makers) in the linking of the impact of the ECoC with urban development. These will be the agents of change in the run up to the ECOC year and beyond.”²⁷

Among the strong points of the bid, the Selection Panel highlighted “the aim to develop behavioural change by decision and policy (individually and collectively) makers, through a three-step process of engagement, participation and outreach and the inclusion of a European outlook.”²⁸ The panel appreciated the innovative central focus on three levels of on engagement leading to participation, to outreach. It was appreciated that “other ECoCs have tried this approach but not with the same degree of centrality and attention. Audience development was approached as a transversal element throughout the ECoC”²⁹.

²⁴ C. Turşie and N. Popa, “Cross-Border Issues for Future European Capitals of Culture,” in *Transforming Cities, Paradigms and potentials of Urban Development within the “European Capital of Culture”*, eds. Wolfgang Schneider and Kristina Jacobsen (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2019), 126.

²⁵ C. Turşie, N. Popa, “Cross-Border Issues for Future European Capitals of Culture”, 127.

²⁶ The European Capital of Culture 2021 in Romania, “The Selection Panel’s Final Report,” (Bucharest, October 2016), 15.

²⁷ The European Capital of Culture 2021 in Romania, “The Selection Panel’s Final Report,” (Bucharest, October 2016), 14.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ The European Capital of Culture 2021 in Romania, “The Selection Panel’s Final Report” (Bucharest, October 2016), 16.

of these selected texts confirms the strong connection between the concept of participation and the concept of audience (Fig. 1).

When analysing the strongest connectors of the concept of participation (Fig. 2), we also found “audience/s”, “cultural” and “engagement”. Concepts associated to superior rungs of participation (self-governance, decision-making) were, to a lesser extent, connected to the concept of participation in the bid.

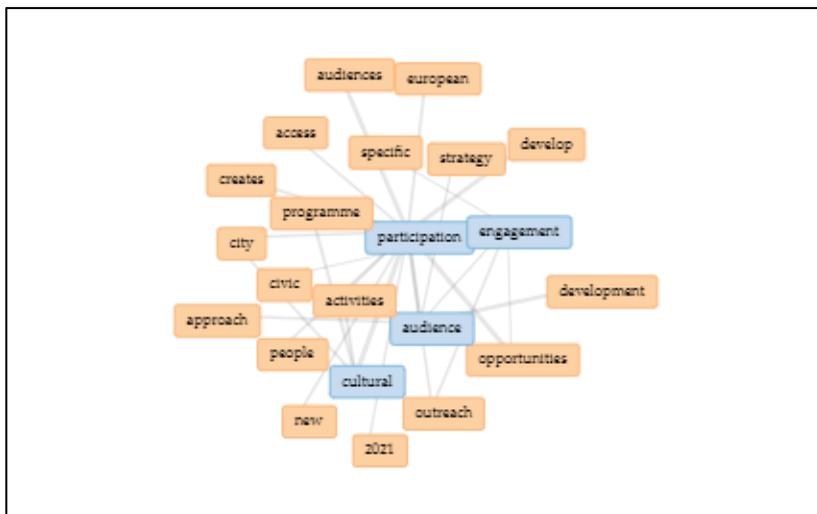


Fig. 2. The concept of “participation” and its connectors in Timisoara 2021 Bidbook

C. Participatory practices in the Implementation phase

Timisoara ECoC 2021 timeframe is divided into three phases³⁰: the Start-Up phase (2017-2018) launched capacity building and public engagement programmes; the Production phase (2019-2021) is supposed to accelerate the co-creation of the cultural programme with international partners; 2022 and beyond is the Legacy phase.

The Start-Up phase launched several preparatory activities. The “Power station” programme included capacity building activities for

³⁰ Timisoara European Capital of Culture 2021, “First Monitoring Meeting Report by the panel of independent experts” (Brussels, October 2017), 3.

cultural operators (“TMWork”, “Lab for European Project Making”, “Cultural Mediators”, “Cultural Leadership Summerschool”). The Engagement Unit initiated an audience development project, with several meetings per year (“Café 21”). In terms of volunteer programmes, in 2017 Timisoara 2021 had 160 volunteers³¹. No other data are provided for the following years.

Three multi-annual projects, on different “trails” and “stations”, started in 2017 with pilot-episodes: “Addictive lights” – “Simultan Festival” (audio-visual art), “Light over Borders” – “Bega!” festival (organised on the banks of the Bega River, which flows over the state border) and “Moving fireplaces” (anthropological research in the Banat region).

Other multi-annual projects started in 2018: “Light Festival” (an open-air spectacle to be performed each year until 2021, in one of the main three central squares of the city, under different themes, reflecting the city’s history); “Citadel Memories” (“Memoriile cetăţii” – installations placed in different neighbourhoods); “Fo(u)r public spaces – theatrical representations of the Hungarian Theatre of Timisoara, in public spaces;” “Slowing down” (“La pas”) – a gastronomic heritage festival; and “Theatre as resistance” – a research project based on theatre archives.

Among these multi-annual projects, “Bega!” festival and “Light Festival” were co-produced involving local professional and amateur artists: actors, dancers and musicians. Bega! festival - 2018 edition gathered 25.000 spectators³².

Two micro-calls for artistic projects took place in 2018, both aiming to select temporary installations to be co-produced by local artists within existing projects (“Citadel Memories” and “Transite” – North Train Station).

The Start-Up phase ended with the launching, in December 2018, of the first major open call for project ideas - “Searchlight”. As mentioned in the Bidbook, the call aimed to select additional projects proposed by the local cultural and creative actors, to be included in the cultural programme. Still, given the financial difficulties registered by Timisoara 2021, the participants were recommended to provide co-financing for their proposals and to prove their financial feasibility. From a total of 72

³¹ Timisoara 2021 European Capital of Cultural, “Activity Report” (Timisoara, 2017), 23.

³² Timisoara 2021 European Capital of Culture, “Activity Report” (Timisoara, 2018), 22.

proposals, 23 projects were declared winners by three interdisciplinary Consultative Bodies of experts³³. The call is an example of shared decision making regarding the projects to be co-produced and (partially) financed – the Consultative bodies were selected by the Executive Board of Timisoara 2021, following an open call.

Several new multi-annual projects started in 2019, in the production phase, aiming to progressively extend the public of cultural activities to diverse categories of population such as youth: “Punct termic” (transdisciplinary workshops for youths, organised in refurbished former neighbourhood power plants), “Sport 21” (sports festival), Impuls (street art), “Spotlight heritage” (a digital participatory repository of citizens’ stories regarding the cultural heritage of three neighbourhoods of Timisoara to be constructed over a period of three years). Other projects were tailored to target various groups: socially marginalized people, people targeted by discrimination and hate speech and minority groups - Roma (“O4Roma”), LGBTQ community (“Identity Education”), women (“HERCity”), minorities (“Romanians in Serbia”), people with disabilities (“Central Park” – dance workshops for people with hearing disabilities).

Specific projects were meant to celebrate two important historical moments: the 1989 Romanian Revolution (“Citadel Memories-the Revolution” and “Heritage Contact Zones”) and the union of the Banat region with Romania in 1919 (“At the Border – Romanians in Serbia”). “Citadel Memories-the Revolution” – the project noted by the Selection Panel in 2016, was implemented in a co-creation rationale, based on investigating the mental maps of the citizens of Timisoara regarding the 1989 Revolution.

Other projects were included in the 2019 programme and labelled as collaborations, even though they pre-existed independently for several years (“JazzTM”, “LitVest”, “Art Encounters”, “TimiShort”, “Central European Film Festival”). The purpose of this strategy of mixing reports on in-house, co-produced and labelled projects might be to fill in the gaps in the programme caused by the fact that some projects proposed in the bid book could not be implemented, due to financial constraints.

³³ Timisoara 2021 Official Website, “Searchlight- winner projects” (Timisoara, 2019).

Timisoara 2021 worked with as little as approximately 25-30% of the budget promised in the bid book³⁴.

Despite these shortcomings, it was appreciated that community engagement “is fully integrated in the design of the programme”³⁵. Data from a first sociological research report commissioned by Timisoara 2021 and produced by an independent body in December 2018, provided an updated interim evaluation on the impact of the preparation of the ECOC year on the cultural life of the city. It showed that “the perception of culture as an important element of society has strongly increased in Timisoara. It also reveals a sharp increase in cultural participation. In particular, the independent sector has registered the highest increase in terms of audience. Another result highlighted in the evaluation is the increased degree of satisfaction with the cultural offer in Timisoara. Moreover, the citizens seem to consider the Timisoara 2021’s Programme as an excellent opportunity for the overall development of the city.”³⁶

IV. Conclusions

Among the rungs of participation described in the second part of the paper, Timisoara 2021 applied several participatory practices. The bidding phase was based on public consultations (through surveys and public meetings) with the local population, local stakeholders and external experts; this practice was meant to raise awareness, provide legitimacy and seed incentives for future participation in the cultural programme. The preparatory years before the title are registering a mix of participative practices. Several flagship multiannual projects are based on co-creation, involving the local population more than being simple spectators; these projects are supposed to contribute to the legacy of the programme. The 2018 “Searchlight” open call enriched the cultural programme with co-productions involving local cultural actors; it was also an example of shared decision-making with representatives of the local community. The post-2019 phase of the programme diversified the targeted population groups in an inclusive rationale of audience

³⁴ European Commission, “Timisoara European Capital of Culture 2021. Second Monitoring Meeting Report by the Expert Panel” (Timisoara, June 2019), 6.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 6.

development – a transversal preoccupation throughout the cultural programme. The volunteering programme did not report publicly its annual progress, it will probably receive more importance in 2021.

The first two Monitoring Reports of the European Commission evaluated positively the issue of outreach. It appears that Timisoara 2021 managed to involve different groups and that engagement plans were professionally managed. The issue of capacity building also proved to be important for the implementation of the ECOC and for the cultural development of the city and was appreciated as a strong point of the Timisoara 2021 plans. Some positive interim results show that the positive perception of the local cultural sector is growing. The participatory approach and the multi-annual projects are supposed to contribute to the legacy of Timisoara 2021 and represent, despite serious financial difficulties, sound bases for the cultural year. It remains to be seen whether self-governance of the local cultural sector, the desired legacy of Timisoara 2021, will become a reality.

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