

European Capital of Culture as a Challenge and an Opportunity

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Based on the keynote delivered at the ENCC Bridge Makers Conference in Sofia on 18 September 2026

The European Capital of Culture has developed since 1985 into one of the EU's most ambitious and visible cultural initiatives. It combines cultural development, European cooperation, citizen participation and longer term urban and regional transformation within one process. The European Commission's most recent evaluation confirms that the action can strengthen cultural activity, international cooperation, tourism, investment, social inclusion and the position of culture within local development.

These opportunities also explain why an ECoC is so demanding. A candidate city is asked to imagine a different future through culture and, long before it knows whether it will receive the title, demonstrate that the political, financial, organisational and cultural conditions exist to make that future credible. The process can mobilise citizens and institutions, place culture much higher on the political agenda, attract new partnerships and investment, increase international visibility and strengthen the attractiveness of a city and region for visitors, businesses, students and residents. Research into the action also shows that the bidding process itself can stimulate cultural strategies, political commitment and investment, including in cities that ultimately do not receive the title.

Realising the full potential of an ECoC nevertheless requires more than a compelling vision, an attractive bid book and a strong cultural programme. The process has to connect candidature, designation, preparation, delivery and legacy as parts of the same development trajectory. This requires candidate cities to think beyond planning and to design the ECoC they intend to deliver. It also requires them to consider from the beginning what should remain after the title year and how the candidature itself can begin producing that change.

Designing the ECoC during candidature

One of the most persistent difficulties in the ECoC process arises in the transition between candidature and delivery. European Commission guidance and evaluation have repeatedly identified problems connected with governance, team building, political interference, insufficient long term planning, unclear milestones and weak legacy preparation. The transition from developing a competitive bid to implementing a highly complex cultural programme has consequently been a recurring source of difficulty throughout the history of the action.

Candidating and delivering require different organisational capacities. Candidating operates within the logic of competition. It requires a convincing vision, a distinctive narrative, strong artistic concepts, citizen mobilisation, European partnerships, political support and the ability to demonstrate to local stakeholders and the independent ECoC selection panel that the proposed transformation is both ambitious and credible and that it fulfils the formal criteria of the ECoC action.

Delivery operates within a different logic. It requires a fully functioning professional organisation capable of translating intentions into implementation. Budgets become expenditure and cash flow. Projects become contracts, procurement procedures, production schedules and concrete obligations. Partnerships have to work in practice. Political promises need to become durable commitments. Responsibilities, reporting lines and decision making authority have to be clear.

The leadership and professional profiles required for these two phases may also differ considerably. A successful candidature often depends on people who can create a compelling vision, build coalitions, mobilise a cultural sector, generate ideas, negotiate political support and communicate ambition. Delivery requires executive leadership, financial and organisational management, programme production, human resource management, procurement, risk management and the ability to lead a large and complex organisation under considerable public and political scrutiny. Some people possess both sets of capacities, but this cannot be taken for granted. The transition can therefore also be difficult for members of bidding teams who have invested years of professional work and considerable personal commitment in the candidature but whose profiles may not necessarily correspond to the roles required during delivery.

This is where the distinction between planning an ECoC and designing an ECoC becomes important. Planning describes what the city intends to do. It sets out programmes, activities, timelines, resources and anticipated outcomes. Designing creates the structures, commitments and operating conditions through which those plans can actually be delivered.

A credible candidature already requires commitments concerning governance, finance, political support, management and capacity to deliver. Designing goes substantially further. It develops those commitments to a level of operational readiness. The governance model and division of authority should already be clear. Political and financial commitments should be sufficiently secure to be translated into realistic budgets and cash flow. The relationship between political authorities and the delivery organisation should be defined. Management profiles, staffing requirements and recruitment processes should be prepared. Office requirements and administrative systems should be identified. Programme development procedures, contracting, procurement, monitoring and risk management should be developed sufficiently to become operational immediately. A detailed work plan should set out what happens during the first weeks and months after designation and who is responsible for making it happen.

The objective should be to make the transition following designation as close as practically possible to plug and play. Valuable time should not be lost renegotiating basic governance arrangements, redistributing responsibilities, recruiting all senior leadership from scratch or reconfirming political and financial commitments that were fundamental to the candidature. The period immediately after designation should be used to accelerate programme development and delivery rather than reconstruct the organisation needed to do so.

The same principle applies if the city does not win. An ECoC candidature may take several years and mobilise cultural organisations, municipalities, citizens, businesses, universities and European partners. It generates ideas, networks, skills, knowledge, political attention and expectations. The Commission evaluation notes that there is often no structured mechanism for capitalising on the work and competences generated by unsuccessful bids, even though the bidding process itself can become an important moment of cultural renewal.

A serious candidature should therefore be designed to create value under either outcome. Winning the title allows the strategy to be developed with substantially greater resources, visibility and European reach. Losing should not mean abandoning the cultural development process that made the candidature worthwhile in the first place. The candidature itself should already be changing the city.

Chitalishta – inclusiveness, European dimension, legacy

This question has particular relevance in Bulgaria today. The competition for the European Capital of Culture 2032 is under way, with one Bulgarian and one Danish city due to hold the title. The candidature process therefore offers a timely opportunity to consider how Bulgaria's

existing cultural infrastructure can contribute to an ECoC that reaches beyond established institutions and habitual cultural audiences.

The chitalishta are particularly relevant in this context. Their nationwide presence, community roots, local legitimacy, intergenerational relationships and combination of cultural, educational and heritage functions give Bulgaria an infrastructure that few European countries possess in comparable form. UNESCO describes the chitalishta as community established and self governing cultural centres distributed across the country, open to all and central to the transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

For a Bulgarian ECoC, their potential contribution extends far beyond providing venues for activities conceived and produced elsewhere. They could become active partners in programme development and delivery and provide a direct connection between an ECoC and people who may have little contact with major cultural institutions or international cultural networks. Their local knowledge and trusted position within communities can help engage different generations, connect heritage with contemporary cultural practice and create opportunities for citizens to become contributors and producers rather than simply audiences.

This capacity is particularly important for the European dimension, which is the DNA of an ECoC. A strong European dimension, therefore, involves much more than inviting international artists or placing European names on a programme. It develops through cooperation, co creation, co production, curatorial exchange, residencies, mobility, conferences, networks and sustained partnerships around issues of shared European themes and relevance. At the same time, an ECoC should make its own cultural specificities visible to Europe and contribute local knowledge and experience to wider European conversations.

The European dimension becomes especially powerful when it reaches into everyday community life. A chitalishte that develops a lasting relationship with cultural partners elsewhere in Europe can bring that dimension directly into all communities of a big city, to a town or a village. Young people can build international relationships. Local histories and traditions can be reconsidered through wider European perspectives. Artists and communities from different countries can work together around shared questions. Cultural organisations that previously had little international experience can develop the capacity to cooperate across borders.

This creates an important connection between outreach, European cooperation and legacy. The partnerships, professional skills, confidence, networks and international experience generated through an ECoC do not disappear when an event finishes. They remain within the organisation and the community. In this respect, Bulgaria's chitalishta could become important partners in ensuring that an ECoC reaches across society while embedding its European dimension well beyond the established cultural institutions and their usual audiences.

Start with legacy

Legacy is still too often approached as something that follows the title year. It should instead be the first question in designing an ECoC. The Commission's evaluation confirms that weak legacy planning and the rapid phasing out of delivery organisations can result in missed opportunities and a loss of momentum precisely when the longer term benefits should be consolidated.

Before constructing the narrative or developing the programme, a candidate city should therefore determine what it wants the ECoC process to change. This may include stronger cultural organisations, deeper European relationships, increased cultural participation, better

cooperation between the city and its wider territory, new professional skills, stronger cultural leadership and more internationally connected communities. It may also involve changes in patterns of cultural participation, attitudes and habits, new forms of cultural production and consumption, new working methods and substantial capacity building across the cultural ecosystem.

These intended changes should shape the candidature from the beginning. If stronger local organisations are part of the desired legacy, they need meaningful responsibilities during candidature and delivery. If deeper European relationships are part of the legacy, international cooperation needs to be embedded in institutions and communities from the outset. If broader participation is an objective, citizens and local organisations need opportunities to influence and produce cultural activity throughout the process. If stronger cooperation across a wider territory is intended, the structures that enable such cooperation need to be created years before the title year.

Conclusion

The European Capital of Culture is both a challenge and an opportunity because it requires cities to combine cultural ambition with political commitment, organisational capacity, European cooperation and meaningful participation across society. Its potential lies in the fact that all of these elements can reinforce one another and contribute to longer term cultural and regional development.

For candidate cities, this makes the candidature itself a critical phase. The ECoC should be designed, not merely planned, so that the structures, commitments and capacities required for delivery are already taking shape before designation. This reduces the disruption of the transition from candidature to implementation and ensures that the process creates value even if the title is not won.

In Bulgaria, the chitalishta offer an exceptional opportunity to extend this process beyond established cultural institutions and audiences. Their involvement can strengthen outreach, deepen the European dimension and help ensure that the benefits of an ECoC are embedded in communities and continue beyond the title year. In this sense, the true opportunity of an ECoC lies in using the entire process to create lasting cultural capacity, stronger European connections and a more resilient cultural ecosystem.