

FUTURE-MAKING IN THE EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE

Rijeka and Nova Gorica Compared

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The article deals with the concept of future-making and its European (i.e., EU) dimension in the context of European Capital of Culture projects. The analysis is based on two case studies – Rijeka 2020 and Nova Gorica 2025. The authors focus on ECoC bid books and other strategic documents that give insight into the desired legacy of the event and the (re) positioning of each city on the cultural and political map of Europe through the transposition of relevant European topics into local contexts. They examine the visions of the anticipated urban development that is hoped to occur as a direct consequence of the project's implementation.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture, future-making, urban space, Rijeka, Nova Gorica

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to analyze city-making strategies in European Capitals of Culture (ECoC)¹ by focusing on future-making in the host cities, and the role which the European dimension plays in these processes.² These two aspects of the ECoC initiative are intertwined: in its official documents, turning a city into a *European Capital of Culture* is often treated as a catalyst for achieving future-oriented urban transformations. As one can read in the European Commission's guide for preparing the bid, the ECoC is a "European project" with an "appeal at European level," which is, at the same time, an opportunity for cities to gain "significant economic or

¹ The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) program is one of the most established and recognized competitive cultural initiatives instituted by the European Union. Since 1985, when the project started, the yearlong ECoC title has been awarded to more than sixty cities in the EU and EU candidate countries. It has become a highly desired brand for cities around Europe that used the opportunity to fulfil various objectives in terms of city-marketing, image (re)construction, and urban regeneration. It is therefore perceived as an event "which aims at various cultural, political, economic and social impacts at local, regional, and European levels" (Lähdesmäki 2012: 1).

² This article is based on the research conducted in the frame of the bilateral project "Urban Futures: Imagining and Activating Possibilities in Unsettled Times", financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (J6-2578) and the Croatian Science Foundation (IPS-2020- 01-7010). More on the project: www.citymaking.eu.

social benefits [...] – city infrastructure, physical regeneration, inward investment, increased pride in the city” or, in other words, “legacy that lives on” for decades after the year of the title (European Commission 2014: 12–13). The aim of this article is, therefore, to examine how imaginaries related to future development of the European Capitals of Culture are devised and conceptualized within ECoC programs.

We base our analysis on two case studies – ECoC in Rijeka, Croatia, that took place in 2020, and ECoC-to-be in Nova Gorica,³ Slovenia, that will start in 2025. The cities we chose for our research were selected due to similarities that allow comparison.⁴ Both Rijeka and Nova Gorica are situated on the state border or in close proximity to it, and they bear strong multicultural and multi-ethnic character. They are political, economic, administrative, and educational centers of their respective regions and there are strong ties between both cities in terms of ECoC cooperation. Both cities face similar challenges in terms of population changes and a need to redefine their economic base and local identities in the postsocialist context.

We will focus on two main research questions. Firstly, we are interested in the reasons for which the city – i.e., the city government and other public policymakers – chose to place a bid for becoming an ECoC. Most often, a particular city points out specific neuralgic points that should be addressed and later resolved through the implementation of the ECoC program. This first question leads us to the understanding of which (different) urban futures are envisioned through ECoC programs and which concrete steps are outlined to activate those futures. Our approach to future-making is inspired by Felix Ringel’s concept of temporal agency. We see it as a specific form of knowledge that is under constant attempts to be subjected to one’s own ends by predicting, forecasting, planning, projecting, envisioning, designing, or coordinating its (future) content (Ringel 2016: 26; see also Bryant and Knight 2019).

We understand the ECoC as an event that stimulates numerous aspects of temporal agency from actors involved. By focusing on plans, projects, visions, and hopes related to the event, we follow Michael Flaherty’s idea about temporal agency as “time work” (Flaherty 2020) through which individuals and collectives try to provoke, control, or customize various kinds of temporal experiences (Flaherty 2020: 13). In our case, these are situated in the future, in something that is yet to occur. Still, it is possible to get a glimpse of them by focusing on plans for the event as they “entail a broad set of tactics, technologies and institutions to try to control the passage into the future, including practices and ideas that have spread across private and

3 Even though Nova Gorica won the ECoC project with a joint bid together with its Italian partner city of Gorica/Gorizia, we will, throughout the article, use “Nova Gorica ECoC” or similar as the main denomination of the project since the Slovenian city is the main holder of the title. Nevertheless, cross-border cooperation is a very important aspect of the project, as we will show in the article.

4 Research in the two ECoC cities has mostly been conducted independently. Nevena Škrbić Alempijević followed preparations and the realization of Rijeka ECoC program from 2019 to 2020. In the frame of “Urban Futures” project, together with Valentina Gulin Zrnčić and Jasna Čapo, she carried out ethnographic field research in Rijeka from 2021 to 2023. Jaro Veselinovič is currently following the preparatory stages of Nova Gorica 2025 ECoC. The ongoing ethnographic field research started in 2021 and will be carried out until the year of the title. In 2022, two joint field visits were organized both to Rijeka and Nova Gorica.

public organizations” (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013: 2). Furthermore, planning is understood here as “an assemblage of activities, instruments, ideologies, models and regulations aimed at ordering society through a set of social and spatial techniques” (ibid.: 3). Both of these techniques are inextricably linked to two aspects of urban futures we are interested in, namely the ideological and material one. We therefore understand planning as paving the way for an urban future that is imagined and desired through the implementation of the ECoC project.

A useful notion for grasping ECoC future-making mechanisms is legacy. In European Commission documents, ECoC legacy is defined as “a long-term cultural policy strategy capable of generating a sustainable cultural, economic and social impact” (European Commission 2014: 32). As Garcia and Cox showed in their analysis of success strategies and long-term effects of ECoCs, in city bids legacy is mostly associated with “economic development” and “economic contribution” (2013), with culture and creative industries perceived as generators of employment and economic and tourism growth (Campbell 2011; Falk and Hagsten 2017). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify, in the last decade or so, a growing interest in the project’s impact on the cultural sector (cf. Quinn 2009; Hudec et al. 2019). In our research, the different definitions of legacy help us detect spheres that the project leaders find crucial in directing change toward a desirable vision of the city’s future, as well as those niches that are absent from ECoC future envisioning. That notion also gives us an insight into the interplay between general EU tendencies, with the European Commission terminology and agenda for European cities’ development on the one hand, and the specific local challenges, interests, and strivings of host cities on the other. The ways in which those processes, networks, and interactions are put in motion in the cases of Rijeka and Nova Gorica are analyzed in the chapter “Envisioning ECoC Futures.” Secondly, we focus on the European dimension of both ECoCs. We are interested in themes that are identified and put forward by Rijeka and Nova Gorica as the *European* topics that bind the whole program together and in their commonalities. The above-mentioned guidelines state that “the European dimension is at the heart of an ECoC’s program” and should promote “the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens” and, at the same time, highlight “the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history, as well as European integration and current European themes” (European Commission 2014: 16). Our second research question focuses on ways in which the European dimension is conceived in both ECoCs and on the cities’ strategies for (re)interpretation of their Europeanness in concrete political and cultural contexts. This question is primarily, but not solely, addressed in one of the following chapters, “Becoming European Capitals of Culture”.

In this vein, we situate the study of the ECoCs’ European dimension into the wider field of Europeanization studies, whereas the latter is primarily understood as a set of interrelated practices and projects “of different actors who constantly refer to particular images of Europe and becoming European, and thereby construct, maintain and reify it” (Musliu 2021: 5). Those studies often interpret the process

of Europeanization as a conceptual framework based on the desirability of change. It encompasses both “major structural transformation within the region” becoming Europeanized (Featherstone and Kazamias 2001: 3) and the shift in symbolic politics in which Europe is envisioned as a destination of that move forward (Horolets 2003). Such tendencies are particularly intense when the process of becoming (more) European is evoked for or in the EU periphery and in the countries still struggling with the question of how to deal with contested socialist pasts. In line with these approaches, in this article, we insist on the situational character of European identity building, which is a process that is never straightforward and targets a vague spectrum of meanings between national belonging, the making of cultural regions, and the production of a global citizen. Still, there are notions that EU policymakers proclaim to be “shared European features and values”, such as “the good quality of life, freedom, and culture” (Horolets 2003: 117), as well as peace-building strategies and working beyond national borders. Since the political agents treat culture as a soft power tool and a communication channel across Europe, culture-driven urban development can also be seen as an instance of Europeanization, as we will show in the following chapters.

Europe, legacy, and futures in previous research on ECoCs

The European Capital of Culture platform has been a theme of numerous studies in various research fields and disciplines. The overwhelming majority of existing literature, as we will show in this chapter, comes from the fields of sociology and political science (cf. Mittag 2013; Sassatelli 2009) as well as urban planning and transformation (cf. Turşie 2020; Nedučín and Krklješ 2022), tourism (cf. Liu 2014; Srakar and Vecco 2017), and, to a lesser extent, cultural anthropology (cf. Ingram 2011; Patel 2013). In this short literature review, we will present the main topics and research questions addressed by scholars in the past decades. We will particularly examine how the two main analytical axes of our article – the European dimension and future-making as devised within ECoC programs – were dealt with in previous research.

The bulk of sociological and political science literature regarding ECoC programs tackled the issue of European identity-building processes and the position of the initiative in wider Europeanization debates and EU cultural policy contexts. Some authors critically assessed the role of the ECoC in this respect and dismissed it as a “pathetic exercise in cultural engineering” (Delanty 1995: 128) and pointed to a lack of a “strong conceptual link to European integration” (Theiler 2005: 63). Others, such as Monica Sassatelli, recognized the platform as “the EU’s most direct attempt, one that is both practical and symbolic, at substantiating a ‘European cultural space,’” while “trying to shape new representations and narratives informing new (actual) social realities and identities” (Sassatelli 2009: 79; see also Palonen

2011; Lähdesmäki 2012; Sassatelli 2002). The initiative was thus recognized as a “soft power resource for the European Union” (Sianos 2017) or a “tool of cultural Europeanization” (Lähdesmäki et. al 2021) through which the EU expands its influence while simultaneously enabling the designated capital of culture to improve its position on the cultural map of Europe (Mittag 2013; Staiger 2013). This relates mostly to the initiative’s so-called European dimension, which has been the subject of many studies that explored the ways in which notions of Europe and European-ness were localized and used to develop or brand a particular city’s image in ECoC programs. Immler and Sackers, for example, traced how the concepts of Europe changed in ECoC bid books in the period from 2008 to 2018. They concluded that the European dimension was increasingly perceived as a vital part of the program, while culture was understood as a means to achieve a paradigm shift by “creating new forms of solidarity, via strengthening ‘local bonding’ and linking it to global references at the same time” (2014: 23). Similar findings are evident in Fage-Bulter and Gorbahn’s research that focused on the notion of Europeanness in the Aarhus 2017 ECoC program. The authors noticed two aspects of the European dimension: one “characterized by diversity, transformation and transnational interconnectedness,” thus promoting contemporary European values, and the other aspect grounded on a more “traditional narrative, based on the construction of a homogenous European identity” (2020: 27). Corina Turşie, on the other hand, inspected the ways in which cities re-invented their identities and re-narrated their histories in order to situate themselves into a broader European context. In the case of Pecs and Marseille, according to the author, the cities turned towards the European identity by distancing themselves from the unwanted communist and colonialist heritage (Turşie 2015). The European dimension is therefore largely perceived as an “ideological framework of an urban event” (Lähdesmäki 2014b: 3), through which the European Commission implements its cultural policies that have, in the last decades, functioned under the model of integration by interpellation, meaning that it is being used as a form of governmentality that seeks from its subjects to “produce new forms of knowledge” and carry out “self-invention on European terms” (Patel 2013: 73). Such a critical approach that detects how the idea of Europe is constructed and activated within ECoC programs is one of the starting points for our analysis as well.

Another key concept that we discuss in this article – ECoC legacy – has also been raised in several previous studies. They focused on methods and means applied by the organizers to ensure the project’s long-term legacy, which was primarily understood as its impact on the growth of urban tourism and urban regeneration processes. The first cities that were awarded the title, such as Athens, Florence, Amsterdam, and Paris, were already established tourist and cultural destinations on the European map that did not need a lot of investment to host such cultural mega-event. After the ECoC in Glasgow in 1990, the trend turned towards middle-sized and/or cities considered peripheral in terms of recognizability and cultural production, which used and understood culture differently from their metropolitan counterparts. If the former mostly put emphasis on the presentation of high arts, smaller cities used the

concept of culture in a more anthropological sense, encompassing various aspects of urban everyday life and striving for legacy that would enhance the overall quality of life of their citizens.

This should come as a little surprise since the understanding of the ECoC program moved towards seeing it as “a multi-dimensional action that must incorporate economic and cultural objectives, must represent both local cultural heritage and European identities, and must stage an international arts event while simultaneously advancing the local cultural sector and social inclusion objectives” (O’Callaghan 2012: 186). Such understanding, which falls in line with the EU guidelines for organizing the ECoC that since the 2010s have emphasized the importance of community engagement, local participation, and social cohesion (Tommarchi, Hansen and Bianchini 2018), paved the way for studies that explored the local level of ECoC implementation. Such studies opened new ways for researchers that deal with issues of resistance and the counter-programming the official ECoC program by opponents of the project (Giovanangeli 2015; van der Bergh 2022), conflicts over ECoC policies and discourses that “create inevitable fragmentation, anxiety and dissonance in host cities” (O’Callaghan 2012: 186), and participatory practices and their reception among local residents (Dova et al. 2022; Turşie 2021; Sanetra-Szeliga 2022).

Most of the research on ECoCs was conducted within the year in which the city carried the title or, more often, after the event itself. The period of preparations for the ECoC project is regularly omitted from the research scope, although it could provide researchers with important insights into the city dynamics and transformations triggered by the program. Furthermore, the future-making dimension of the ECoC as developed in official strategic documents (bid book, cultural strategy, etc.) or visions of urban development as imagined by organizers, politicians, cultural workers, and local residents are often neglected or not sufficiently researched (with some exceptions, see Dova 2013; Škrbić Alempijević and Gulin Zrnić 2022). Although previous studies discussed ECoC-driven economic development and tourism growth, culture-led regeneration, and, to some extent, legacy, they rarely brought these trends explicitly in relation to urban futures in a wider social sense, i.e., with projections of what kind of city is desired, imagined, and being shaped by the ECoC program from the perspective of various social agents. That is an analytical gap we wish to tackle in this article.

Two case studies

We will structure further analysis of ECoC city-making strategies by identifying certain key concepts and programmatic approaches related to the image of Europe(anness) and visions of urban futures present in both our cases, Rijeka and Nova Gorica. The case studies for comparison were selected on the basis of both bid books and their contents – both ECoCs are, in various forms, constructing their nar-

rative around the notion of borders and questions related to issues that occurred after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and during the transition from socialism and European integration processes, namely the outward migration, demographic changes, economic restructuring, unemployment as well as the climate crisis, integration of refugees and growing importance of sustainable modes of dwelling. Before moving to our combined discussion of meanings attached to those categories, we will briefly present the two urban contexts in which the ECoCs took or will take place, as well as our methodology.

“Port of Diversity” – that is the slogan that the City of Rijeka and cultural experts working on the Rijeka 2020 proposal launched in 2016 in order to produce and boost the city’s distinctiveness in relation to other ECoC candidates (cf. Škrbić Alempijević and Gulin Zrnić 2022). Their terminology and methodological tools closely echoed the agenda defined by the European Commission, which pointed to an imperative to “highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe”⁵ through ECoC programs. At the same time, the project creators based their candidature on specific features of the city’s tumultuous history and on the epithet of ‘openness’ – in terms of tolerance, multiculturalism, and inclusion – attributed to Rijeka in popular discourse. Rijeka’s diversity, state the authors, stems from the fact that, as one of the most propulsive industrial cities and harbors on the eastern side of the Adriatic, it attracted immigrants across Europe from the 19th century (RI2020 Team 2016: 4–5). Furthermore, the city was an integral part of twelve states over the past hundred years, and the introduction and dissolution of borders greatly influenced the city’s realities. One of them led to a great exodus of ethnic Italians in the post-WWII period, and the influx of numerous new citizens arriving from various parts of the-then Yugoslavia, which led to the tripling of Rijeka’s population to 140.000 inhabitants in the 1970s (Dukovski 2010; Žic 2006).

Nowadays, Rijeka is a shrinking city with about 109,000 citizens, according to the 2021 census. It was deeply affected by deindustrialization from the 1990s on, which left spacious former industrial areas without a function up to the present. The city government and Rijeka 2020 organizers saw the ECoC program as a chance to boost the city’s developmental strategy of culture-driven urban regeneration. It consisted of two important parts: one was infrastructure, i.e., the transformation of several postindustrial ruins into cultural institutions and active spaces. Such was the case with the restructuring of the former Rikard Benčić Motor Equipment Factory into the Art Neighbourhood, which comprises the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rijeka City Museum, Children’s House, and Rijeka City Library (still under construction). The other segments were performances and public events in the frame of the ECoC program. They were conceptualized as points of interest that would attract visitors, but also the city dwellers, to urban areas that they otherwise avoid and thus revive the urban dead zones.

⁵ <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/european-capitals-of-culture> (accessed 22. 3. 2023)

In 2020, plans and dreams of an eventful ECoC year, with a crowded city full of cultural tourists, came to an abrupt halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, turning Rijeka into yet another city with empty public spaces. Many activities were canceled, mega events were diminished to small-scale formats, and infrastructural plans were postponed. Visions of a transformed city were substituted with pandemic realities. The Rijeka 2020 program became a register of planned urban futures that never came to be, at least not to the extent envisioned by the ECoC organizers.

The other case study is yet to happen. In December 2020, Nova Gorica, together with its Italian partner city of Gorica/Gorizia learned that their bid for 2025 ECoC was successful. Mayors of the cities from both sides of the state border and organizational committees celebrated the decision together on the main square in front of the Austro-Hungarian era railway station, a symbolic location that lies directly on the borderline and which carries two denominations – from the Slovenian side of the border, one enters Europe Square, while Italians know under the name Piazza Transalpina. The place for the celebration was not chosen by coincidence. The main concept, developed throughout the bid book, is one of borderlessness, so the square that is half Slovenian and half Italian seemed like a logical choice. The main aim of the ECoC project in Nova Gorica and Gorizia is, as the official slogan, “GO! Borderless” suggests, to establish a “new cultural ecosystem,” based on the project’s long-term legacy in the spheres of culture, economy, urban transformation, and change of everyday socialization patterns (Veselinovič and Kozorog 2022) or, in other words, to create “one cross-border European city” (GO! 2020: 7), an idea that is far from present-day reality.

Nova Gorica is one of the youngest Slovenian cities, established after WWII when a newly drawn border between Italy and the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia cut ties between Gorizia, which served as the political, administrative, and cultural capital of the region up until then, and the predominantly Slovenian countryside, concentrated around the villages of Solkan and Šempeter. The idea behind plans for Nova Gorica was to “build something big, proud, something that would shine across the border,” as an official slogan during the construction stated, i.e., to build a display window of socialism, based on modernist architectural principles, that would show advantages of a socialist system when compared to the Italian counterpart. Due to political reasons, the plan was never fully realized. As the gradual opening of the border between Italy and SFRY from the 1950s onwards enabled bigger economic cooperation and exchange as well as easier crossing of the border, Nova Gorica slowly transformed into a “gateway to capitalism” for Yugoslavs instead of being a socialist beacon (Svenšek 2019). In the following decades, both cities, although highly co-dependent in terms of border economy, developed separately, while ideas for more intensive cooperation only came to the front in the 1990s (Jerman 2008). The transition period after the dissolution of SFRY, however, had a profound impact on both cities. While Nova Gorica saw a strong demise of the industrial sector, which reached its final stage during the 2011 financial crisis, Gorizia also had to face a new reality, namely the downfall of once-blooming com-

merce sector with the steady influx of Yugoslav consumers that kept the city alive for decades. These aspects of everyday life in border cities were also identified by ECoC bid book authors, when they wrote that the whole region found itself in a “downward spiral,” characterized by catastrophic demographic trends, a perished border economy, degraded city areas, and language barriers between inhabitants of both cities (GO! 2020: 5–7).

Due to the fact that the two case studies are in different stages of realization, with one of the programs still in the preparatory phase, the longitudinal analysis of ECoC future-making as activated and perceived by diverse social agents is not (yet) possible. That is why we focus on ways in which ECoC-triggered urban transformation is being planned in official project and city documents. Our research is based on discourse analysis of ECoC bid books for both cities – *RI2020 Port of Diversity* (RI2020 Team 2016) and *GO! Borderless* (GO! 2020). In the case of Nova Gorica and Gorizia, the bid book is a result of a mutual cooperation between different actors in both cities. The scope of participating individuals, collectives, and institutions is broad – from both municipalities and research institutions (e.g., the ZRC SAZU Nova Gorica and Institute of International Sociology of Gorizia) to at least 40 different artists, NGOs, and others whose visions are included inside the document. Yet, since the inclusion of a particular project in the bid book is not a guarantee for the actual realization of it during the ECoC year, it is difficult to assess whether some of these will later be excluded from the overall scheme. The production of the bid book for Rijeka2020 was led by the City of Rijeka, especially by the organizational units and individuals connected to its departments of culture and strategic planning. Numerous representatives from Rijeka’s cultural institutions (such as the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, the City Library, the Croatian National Theatre “Ivan Zajc” in Rijeka, etc.), the local artistic scene, and non-profit organizations took part in the bid book’s conceptualization. After Rijeka won the ECoC title in 2016, some of these agents were employed by Rijeka 2020 LLC, founded by the city and Primorje-Gorski Kotar county with the aim of implementing the program. Several independent cultural experts, visual artists, project designers, architects, and urban planners from other Croatian cities and from abroad also participated in the bid book preparation.⁶

Along with the bid books, we also paid attention to other relevant documents that co-shape the development of both cities, namely *The City of Rijeka Development Plan 2021 – 2027* (hereinafter: RI Development Plan), *Cultural Development Strategy of the City of Rijeka 2013 – 2020* (hereinafter: CDS Rijeka), the *Sustainable Urban Strategy: Nova Gorica by 2030* (hereinafter: SUS Nova Gorica), *Local program of cultural development in Nova Gorica Municipality 2019-2023* (hereinafter: LPCD Nova Gorica). We situate this analysis into the broader field of anthropology of public policy. The latter is understood as a “classificatory device with various meanings,

⁶ Still, leaders of certain cultural platforms in Rijeka and some local independent artists expressed in their interviews that the potential and diversity of the city’s cultural scene was not used sufficiently and that in some cases external experts were given primacy in shaping the program over the local creative sector.

as narratives that serve to justify or condemn the present” (Shore and Wright 1997: 6), while at the same time they can shape the future development of a particular sphere of social life (Gulin Zrnić and Poljak Istenić 2022; Tate 2020). We set out for discourse analysis as a way of “investigating processes of social construction,” a method that sheds light on social worlds and identity building through discourse (Nelson and Hardy 2002). Starting from our research questions, we carried out coding related primarily to the concepts of Europe(anness) and urban futures, i.e., ECoC legacies. The codes we identified and the meanings inscribed in them will be presented and analyzed in the following two chapters.

Becoming *European* Capitals of Culture

In this chapter we will address one of our main research questions and analyze in which ways, and for which purposes, the concept of *Europe* is used in the documents of Rijeka and Nova Gorica ECoCs by highlighting how and why the EU narratives are localized in the field. Indeed, the local evocations of the United Europe project within these cities can be, to an extent, interpreted from a top-down and “center-to-periphery” perspective since they use the European Commission guidelines and definitions as their starting point for reimagining the cities as ECoCs. These imaginaries are stimulated by questions like these:

Are we ready as a city to open up to Europe? Are we willing to engage in a dialogue with the rest of Europe and the world and reflect on the contribution we would like to make to the EU integration project?” (European Commission 2014: 7)

Following the European Commission criteria, every individual ECoC project finds its way to place the European dimension of the city and the program to the forefront. They do so by highlighting dedication to the EU objective expressed in the slogan “unity in diversity,” by promoting EU values, well-being of all EU citizens, cooperation and dialogue beyond national borders, and by fostering micro-level cultural diversity as a contribution to the richness and variety of cultural expressions across Europe. Those ideas and identity strategies are evident in both case studies, Rijeka and Nova Gorica. Two aspects of the European dimension are prominent in both bid books and, to some extent, they are echoed in the cities’ strategic documents: the concepts of border(s) and multiculturalism. Still, in their bid books the two cities conceptualize the European dimension somewhat differently.

The role of both concepts in Nova Gorica’s bid book is central and much of the artistic and cultural content as well as infrastructural aspects of the program are revolving around them. Border(s), as the bid book title suggests, play the main role in the program. The joint ECoC bid can be understood as the final chapter of politically turbulent relations in the region that now seeks to become an exemplary case of cross-border development in the wider European space (SUS Nova Gorica 2022: 11).

The project is presented as a catalyst for “our two cities, with two and more languages, with two histories, born from two opposing ideological backgrounds... [that are] now striving to become one shared European cultural, social, economic and urban eco-system. It is an attractive and positive narrative we want to share: If Slovenes and Italians in the Goriška region can go borderless, well, then everybody in Europe can do it. No excuses” (GO! 2020: 93). With culture as the main tool for cross-border cooperation, the EU is promoting unification of different (ethnic) groups by encouraging them to “create new forms of shared memory and experience, new ways to communicate, new expectations of individuals and groups regarding their own behaviour as well as the needs and actions of political and social formations and institutions” (Anderson, O’Dowd and Wilson 2003: 21). By calling upon building a “much bigger window in our European fence” (GO!2020: 3), the Nova Gorica team pushes the citizens to start “facing each other instead of standing back to back, connecting, being open, being close and orienting towards a borderless future” (ibid.: 16). The debordering processes of Nova Gorica and Gorizia are also strongly echoed in the SUS Nova Gorica that, as a municipal strategic document, aims to “transform the physical border into connecting element that will enable coordinated urbanistic and strategic development of the region” by investing into the spheres of mobility, logistics, education, and common cultural and sporting infrastructure (SUS Nova Gorica 2022: 55–56).

In the case of Rijeka, the integration of its urban spaces torn apart by different state frontiers, but also by symbolic boundaries that divide the we-group from the ethnic and cultural Other, was defined as the city’s key impulse for ECoC candidacy. Unlike Nova Gorica, which points to the current border between two countries and two cities, the Rijeka ECoC mostly tackled the historical borderlines, primarily the one separating the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Kingdom of Italy during the two world wars (RI2020 Team 2016: 4). In the post WW2-period, Sušak and Fiume, two cities on opposite sides of Rječina River (which was planned to be a site of ECoC interventions thematizing border cities, Nova Gorica included), became one – Rijeka. Their unification reflected all the tragedies, losses (especially for ethnic Italian locals), hopes, and new potentials brought about by political border shifts. In that process, in the context of the “barbed wire erected throughout Europe,”⁷ Rijeka “mirrors contemporary Europe” (ibid.: 42). In the discourse of ECoC organizers, it becomes Europe in a nutshell when it comes to cities, lives, and destinies influenced by the border and tensions it triggers.

Cross-border migrations, envisioned both in the contexts of local and European history, formed one of the three main thematic clusters within Rijeka 2020 (ibid.: 17–18). In that segment, lives on the border were treated as a common aspect of European cultures, crucial for designing efficient strategies of European integration. The concept by which the Rijeka 2020 Team opposes mental-mapping strategies in the

⁷ The RI2020 bid book was written in the context of the so-called European migration crisis in 2015/2016, when the placing of barbed wire was the EU border reality and one of the most conspicuous symbols of Fortress Europe.

border-burdened city, and in the EU area in general, is the idea of shared space characterized by urban debordering, cross-border exchange, inclusion, and participation.

Those concepts were brought in connection with multiculturalism as defined in the ECoC 2020 bid book. In it, Rijeka was described as “a unique and distinctive multinational, multi-religious and multicultural city” that promotes “freedom, tolerance and openness” (ibid.: 4). The notion of multiculturalism was embedded in the slogan “Port of Diversity.” Two lines of argumentation were used to translate the EU “foundations of respect for diversity” into local terms: one stemmed from Rijeka’s status as a historical port city, “where seamen became emissaries of cultural exchange” (ibid.: 7–8). The other was based on political discontinuities and migrations. As a result, today Rijeka is “a city with 22 national minorities, where daily papers are published in two languages (until recently four), with two constituent minorities, regular radio broadcasting in the Italian language and a Roma neighbourhood whose inhabitants are integrated into the working and social life of the city” (ibid.: 8). However, whereas diverse cultural expressions, visual arts and performances, community-based events, and customs, were treated as channels through which multiculturalism was enacted in the public sphere, multilingualism did not enter the scope of Rijeka 2020 actions.

Multiculturalism and cultural diversity were keywords that bound various segments of the program together. They were also reflected in the city’s strategic documents, which included direct references to the ECoC project. So, for instance, CDS Rijeka 2013 – 2020, which served as a backbone of the local ECoC initiative, emphasized “encouraging of cultural diversity and multiculturalism” as one of five core principles of the City’s cultural politics (Gradsko vijeće 2013: 18). Such strategic documents were formulated so as to ensure the prolongation of ECoC objectives and achievements. Sustaining “the Capital of Culture after 2020” is one of the specific objectives of the recent RI Development Plan (Gradsko vijeće 2017: 92–95). In the Plan, living in Rijeka in 2030 is projected as living in the City of Diversity, which “finds new uses for its old strengths, its innovation, creativity, multiculturalism and industrial tradition” (ibid.: 1) and turns away from rigid mental boundaries.

Similarly, multiculturalism is, in the case of the Nova Gorica bid book, inseparably linked with the notion of border. Although authors explicitly state their critical stance towards EU’s migration policies when they write that the ECoC should push Europe to re-evaluate them and “make them fair toward internal migration and toward people waiting outside the old fortress’ walls” (GO! 2020: 65), the main emphasis is still put on the local environment and measures that would actually help establish multicultural conurbation. There are also clear attempts to position Nova Gorica and Gorizia on wider cultural and political maps by invoking the grave of the last French king Karl X, which lies in close proximity to both cities (ibid.: 30), the presence of once strong Jewish community in the “Little Jerusalem on the Isonzo” (ibid.: 35), and by referring to the multicultural dimension of everyday life in the area. This layer is emphasized by the invitation to Slovenians, Italians, Friulians, Albanians, Bosnians, Syrians and Chinese to sit behind “the table between us, the place

we meet, the field of thought we want to call Europe, we want to call home” (ibid.: 64). In contrast to Rijeka, the most important aspect of multiculturalism in vivo recognized by GO! 2025 organizers is language. “Passive bilingualism and multilingualism are key topics of our candidacy” (ibid.: 25), states the bid book. The ECoC goal is to encourage and promote the sense of shared cultural space among people on both sides of the border by motivating them to learn at least basic Slovenian or Italian in order to be able to communicate. By doing so, they would “stop being hostages of the past and start approaching a future as a shared eco-system. We want to liberate our languages from ideology and start becoming (passively) bilingual” (ibid.: 93). This is to be further supported by municipal authorities through opening of bilingual kindergartens and the installation of bilingual urban signs because the ECoC is, for them, a starting point of the city’s new identity defined by bilingualism and multiculturalism (SUS Nova Gorica 2022: 67).

In both bid books, borders and multiculturalism are treated as historical facts with a profound impact on everyday life in Nova Gorica and Rijeka in the present. In both cases, although slightly different, the concepts are used as tools for stressing the city’s distinctiveness, and, instead of being treated as obstacles, they are set as cornerstones of anticipated urban futures. However, when set against the everyday life realities and the EU border system, in many respects the proclaimed borderlessness and the concept of European culture(s) without boundaries function like a utopia rather than a strategically outlined future. Since 2015, both cities have witnessed “no border” demonstrations in which activists resisted the EU migration regime. Furthermore, at the time of the Rijeka 2020 event, Croatia was still outside the Schengen zone and struggling with the COVID-19-induced border closures. Moreover, in the case of Nova Gorica, the question of border(s) and sentiment towards Italians (and vice versa) is still very much defined by historical circumstances that shaped the everyday lives in the area in the past century. It is, therefore, not realistic to expect that the above-mentioned measures will change the perception on both sides of the borderline overnight and that inhabitants will fully embrace the narrative about a shared and borderless European future. In some ways, even the treatment of borders in the bid books can be interpreted as a reminder of “Europe trouble,” i.e., of Europe as a deeply bordered space (cf. Sandberg and Andersen 2020). Still, however, it will be interesting and important to follow the impact and potential benefits of the project in years to come since it is primarily a local project that somehow challenges wider European border policy tendencies.

Envisioning ECoC Futures

Successful ECOCs have used the title as a catalyst for a step change in the city’s cultural and general development, producing sustainable cultural, social and economic impact. (European Commission 2014: 14)

This chapter highlights the cities' motives to run for the ECoC title and puts them in relation to the envisioning of concrete local urban futures. Although, as Hess and Cycak (2018) point out, the EU has no direct power in terms of the implementation of urban policies and future urban development, its specter can very much be detected in the field of urban planning. Guidelines and discourses that have been brought forward through documents, such as the *Urban Agenda for the EU*, became internalized on local levels and serve as main starting points when planning further steps for creating model European cities. ECoCs are, understandably, keen on following the trends mentioned in the *Agenda*, such as the inclusion of migrants and refugees, stimulation of jobs and skills in the local economy, climate adaptation and green infrastructure solutions, energy transition, sustainable use of land and nature-based solutions, etc. (Urban Agenda 2016: 7). The question that arises is: what kind of future cities are being shaped through ECoC programs?

In the case of Nova Gorica, it is possible to bring forth three main goals that give an impression of the city after the year 2025: a cross-border European conurbation, a green and vibrant city with a high quality of life and, lastly, an innovative, entrepreneurial-minded city. In terms of "futural orientations" as introduced by Bryant and Knight, the above-mentioned aspects can be situated in the realm of potentiality, described by authors as "the future as virtuality in the present," something that is yet to become and can be, as in case of Nova Gorica, already in the process of emergence (Bryant and Knight 2019: 107–109). According to SUS Nova Gorica, the ECoC is already "in its preparatory stages transforming the local environment" and it is "vital that at the end of the year 2025 the ECoC leaves behind legacy in terms of institutions, programs and projects" that will keep the spirit of 2025 alive (SUS Nova Gorica 2022: 62).

Interestingly, however, the authors do not put much attention to large infrastructural projects that would help achieve these goals, but rather pin their hopes on a gradual change of habits of citizens and municipal administrations, that would, bit by bit, deliver desired changes. The legacy of the ECoC is, in the case of Nova Gorica, not directly dependent on new buildings and infrastructure but rather on connecting the existing cultural and social bases from both sides of the border. Winning the ECoC title is therefore seen as "the first step toward a deep change in our mindset, a proof that success is reachable, that change is possible and that creativity and creative people are our best assets" in overcoming the challenge of the "basic lack of ambition and spirit of entrepreneurship" among the local population (GO! 2020: 7). The GO!2025 is expected to "change the two cities' atmosphere and make them a more desirable place to come and live, it will get us in touch with contemporary approaches and life-styles" and it will, at the same time, "raise the share of cross-border audience on cultural events, it will find new solutions for the post-border economy and it will transform the degraded border area" (ibid.: 7). Most of this is expected to be achieved by a "bottom-up approach, working with and for the citizens, embracing their sensibilities, gently and respectfully pushing their boundaries," engaging "the population in discussions about green mobility and sustainable housing," and

promoting a “real, direct dialogue between companies and institutions,” which is at the same time also detected as project’s main legacy (ibid. 7; see LPCD Nova Gorica 2019: 43). Refurbishments of Nova Gorica are, in the eyes of bid book authors, being tailored to the everyday needs of its citizens, whereas the legacy itself will be measured in more abstract terms.

Nevertheless, in terms of future infrastructural projects, it is necessary to mention the complete renovation of the neo-Islamic style Villa Laščak, the surrounding urban park and area adjacent to the train station, and Europe Square / Piazza Transalpina. Its name, EPICenter, suggests that it is expected to become the scene of events linked to the ECoC and “a city point [of the new conurbation] where people from both sides of the border will come together to enjoy events, food, drink and socializing” even after the project is over (GO!2020: 17). Moreover, there are numerous small-scale projects, such as a cross-border park along the Isonzo/Soča river, new cycle paths, the renovation of Gorizia’s main city park, the upgrade of outdoor venues, and a new urban terrace and meeting point in the green area of Nova Gorica city center (ibid.: 100) that are intended to foster cross-border integration and raise the overall quality of life in the area.

In Rijeka, on the other hand, the post-ECoC futures are already happening. As a rule, futures as actualized and realized deviate from ways they are projected. The COVID-19 restrictions, cancellations of many RI2020 events, especially those based on participation from abroad, the orientation towards the local cultural scene and community-based actions, and delays in construction works were among the reasons for modifications of future tracks. Still, the ECoC bid book functions as a document that captures visions of urban development as designed and translated into the program and action plans in 2016. In it, urban regeneration is set as the backbone of the context-based future-making processes. Unlike Nova Gorica, large infrastructural projects are seen as means to achieve the desired transformation of Rijeka.⁸ They stem from a lack of up-to-date cultural infrastructure and the City government’s goal, stated in strategic documents, to “strengthen capacity of the cultural sector” in Rijeka (Gradsko vijeće 2017: 14). That line of urban regeneration was already set as one of the City’s key priorities in previous development plans and a reason to run for the ECoC title, which was seen as “an opportunity to approach the planning of cultural infrastructure in association with urban regeneration, which is a new task for culture in the development of the city” (RI2020 Team 2016: 10). The building of cultural infrastructure as material legacy of RI2020 has been largely connected to the restructuring of former industrial sites. Such is the case with the Art Neighborhood Benčić, branded as the city’s “living room” that is expected, in the envisioned future, to “become and remain a vital cultural and social center that attracts citizens” (Gradsko vijeće 2017: 93). The same goes for the warehouses of Exportdrvo, wood industry facilities, and the complex of port warehouses named Metropolis, which should function as industrial heritage sites and “imperative space

⁸ Such projects were not financed from ECoC funds, but they used the ECoC label to attract investments from various sources, including EU, national, regional, and local funding.

for cultural and entertainment events in the city” (ibid.). In line with such actions that gained their impetus in the context of the ECoC, the Rijeka of the future is a post-industrial realm with revitalized industrial spaces that contribute to the quality of urban life and place the city on European cultural tourism maps.

Alongside such projects, like in Nova Gorica, the ECoC in Rijeka also connects its legacy with changing mindsets, turning a “tired city” into a proactive one (ibid.: 2). Such a city should raise from citizen involvement and community-based interventions that work in synergy with an engaged city government. That Rijeka of the future “is about active shaping, development, interventions, motivational processes – the transformation of community potentials into a productive, effective and lasting human and cultural capital” (ibid.: 21). In the city’s strategies, civic participation in culture and active citizenship in general are presented as the legacy of the RI2020 program that should be sustained in the future (Gradsko vijeće 2017: 94). According to such developmental concept, Living in Rijeka in 2030 – and beyond – would mean “the quality of life of the individual and care for a healthy, optimistic, just, and inclusive society, with the support of local government” (ibid.: 78).

When we compare the imaginings of post-ECoC futures in Rijeka and Nova Gorica, we can conclude that they always include development and visions of a better future that address certain blind spots or neuralgic points of the two cities in the present. Both ECoC projects, to different extents, envision a renewal of urban life through the production and/or revitalization of shared public spaces. However, in both cases, the activation of urban futures is seen as a matter of fostering social capital rather than preserving cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In the last three decades, ECoCs have transformed from a cultural initiative that stressed the importance of preservation and celebration of cultural heritage in already highly representative and recognized locations into an ambitious action that strives to actively shape urban futures of a particular city in tune with needs and wishes of its inhabitants. The analysis of the RI2020 and GO!2025 bid books, as well as their resonances in the two cities’ strategic plans, thus provides us with some interesting insights into urban future-making processes in the frame of that EU initiative. At first glance, the future(s) presented in these documents seem rather clear-cut, target-oriented, and solution-driven. At their core, the two ECoCs function as developmental projects grounded on the positivist and optimistic idea of unilinear progress while trying to become “a catalyst for a step-change in the development of a city,” to achieve a “measurable increase in the self-esteem of citizens,” “greater European and international understanding and profile,” and the like (European Commission 2014: 5). They are attempting to turn the cities into stories of European success, and sometimes even bring a “concrete and revolutionary utopia” to life (Rosà 2023).

They also include action plans and lists of step-by-step measures that should lead to the proposed future.

However, between the lines of the ECoC proposals there are other futures that are identified, visualized, and even feared. Those are potential futures that resonate with recent urban trends and political and economic issues that the two cities are currently facing that the authors of ECoC documents are trying to get away from: futures of shrinking and passive cities, divided by official state borders and mental boundaries, full of contested spaces, dead zones and ruins, with the communities' ambivalent sense of local and regional pride and belonging. An exercise of imagining a desirable future within the ECoC is thus not only about creating a vision and activating it. It is also about considering multiple futures and selecting the most plausible one; it is about diverging, swerving into a different track, and making a change. It is indeed a matter of temporal agency, as defined by Felix Ringel (2016), that can nonetheless easily and rather quickly transform into an "elusive promise" (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013) that leaves projects unfinished and participants and local inhabitants dissatisfied. Bearing in mind that planning and execution of these events take place in the highly unpredictable and unstable times of polycrisis (Henig and Knight 2023), one can easily imagine a pessimistic scenario that turns the plans upside down – a scenario that literally "infected" the case of Rijeka 2020, leaving the ECoC city shut down by pandemic regulations in the atmosphere of the failed promises of a yearlong and Europe-wide celebration of the city's culture.

Envisioned, or at least verbalized, within the EU project, the futures outlined in the cases of Rijeka and Nova Gorica are also deeply pro-European. In both examples, the building of more progressive places and more resilient communities is directly connected with the EU approach to urban regeneration, creating shared European spaces, and fostering local belonging to the European family. Still, already at the discursive level there are certain paradoxes in establishing and juxtaposing certain concepts as "European values". There are certain cracks in the way proclaimed inclusiveness, tolerance, and multiculturalism is constructed if we bear in mind that the act of conceptualizing borderless European space is, at the same time, a mechanism of excluding spaces, cultures, and ways of living that are not European (enough). It is a process of drawing another border and producing a cultural Other. The highlighting of belonging to the European family is especially important for Croatian and Slovene ECoC cities in the post-Yugoslav and post-socialist context, where the collective memory of strategic positioning in other cultural areas and the symbolic transition from them is still very fresh.

It can be argued that the goal of creating the sense of togetherness and identity building on the European level, which was the case from the very start of the ECoC platform, has slowly moved to a lower, local level. The development of the European dimension and its implementation in the program still play an important role, but as we have shown, cities are increasingly translating common European "hot topics" into the more understandable and easier-to-grasp everyday experiences of citizens, enabling them to participate more eagerly and actively in the shaping of the desired outcome.

Our research has also indicated that the production of European Capitals of Culture in those two cities “is about active shaping, development, interventions, motivational processes” (cf. Gradsko vijeće 2017: 21). In contrast to Ringel’s futures in postindustrial cities seen from the perspective of their inhabitants, who emphasize sustainability and the continuity of local values, know-how, and social capital, post-ECOC futures, as designed in the analyzed documents, reveal a project logic. They have their milestones, outreach, legacies, and measurable results. These future-making strategies are meant to be efficient, productive, innovative, and proactive; they should build anew, transform urbanscapes, and shift local mindsets. They are directed by the contemporary pressure to “perform or else,” as Jon McKenzie interprets the relationship of cultural, organizational, and technological performance in the 21st century (McKenzie 2001). In that sense, producing effect, fostering social capital, and building the sense of community in Rijeka and Nova Gorica are defined as the most important aims that the ECoCs analyzed in this article are hoping to achieve. Although certain emphasis has been placed on new infrastructure, it is not seen as the crown jewel of the project, but rather functions as a support mechanism in the context of community and identity building. It is in the participation of engaged citizens who become aware of their roles as co-creators of the city that the two ECoC projects are seeking brighter, simultaneously locally-grounded and European-wide, futures.

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Stvaranje budućnosti u Europskim prijestolnicama kulture. Usporedba Rijeke i Nove Gorice

Članak se bavi konceptom stvaranja budućnosti i njezinom europskom, odnosno EU dimenzijom u kontekstu inicijative Europske prijestolnice kulture. Istraživanje se temelji na dvije studije slučaja – Rijeka 2020. i Nova Gorica 2025. Autori se fokusiraju na knjige prijave EPK projekata i druge relevantne strateške dokumente koji daju uvid u željeno nasljeđe događaja i u (re)pozicioniranje gradova na kulturnoj i političkoj karti Europe prevođenjem aktualnih europskih tema u lokalne kontekste. Pritom analiziraju vizije urbanog razvoja za koji se očekuje da će se dogoditi kao izravna posljedica provedbe projekta.

Ključne riječi: Europska prijestolnica kulture, stvaranje budućnosti, urbani prostor, Rijeka, Nova Gorica