In order to encourage a common cultural identity, the European Union has been implementing the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) project for 35 years, in which more than 50 cities have participated so far. The city with the title received significant funds from the EU in order to valorize its cultural heritage and turn it into a lasting cultural and tourist product. There is an average of 500 events in the award year and each winner collects an average of 26.5 million euros from the different sources. The money raised for the program is invested in the cultural development of cities, the renovation of the old, and the construction of new facilities and infrastructure. At the same time, the image of cities and their European identity and community is strengthening, so diversity ceases to be what divides, but becomes what unites. In this paper, the authors will elaborate great challenges faced by current and future title holders, Rijeka and Novi Sad, due to the coronavirus pandemic. The conducted research, which included interviews with program managers and key stakeholders in Rijeka and Novi Sad, has shown that innovative approach of adapting the program to the situation and finding a model to implement what has already been planned, may best reflect the European spirit and endurance. On the other hand, the future of the project will be challenged not only by financial and technical issues, but also by emerging new formats, changing motives and expectations of increasingly immobile and jobless participants, closed beyond national borders, in search of a virtual European dimension.

**Keywords:** European Capital of Culture, Rijeka, Novi Sad, Covid-19, pandemic

**INTRODUCTION**

European Capital of Culture is one of the most prestigious European programmes which promotes the idea of Europe, the richness of its cultures and common heritage, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. In 35 years of its existence the ambitious project of valorizing the European identity and heritage has not met with the challenges it had in the last year. The key ideas of the project and its European dimension, transnational cooperation and public participation, mobility of creative workers and investments in cultural infrastructure were challenged by the current pandemic and the consequent closure of borders. Due to the coronavirus pandemic and the impossibility of carrying on with the implementation of cultural and artistic activities, the programs of both 2020 European Capitals of Culture (Rijeka and
Galway) have, after the initial suspension, been considerably reduced and adapted to the new circumstances.

Along with tourism, the cultural sector in general was one of the most damaged in the pandemic. Artistic and cultural events are being postponed or cancelled all across Europe. According to Eurostat data, around 7.3 million cultural workers across the EU currently lack adequate protection. The European Union is supporting cultural sectors at this time, and is taking a fully flexible approach to the deadlines of funding applications through the Creative Europe programme. Although it primarily falls to individual EU countries to propose economic measures for the most affected sectors, including the cultural ones, it seems there will be also some positive experiences from this crisis: future cultural policies can use this move to digital content to shape new and engaging formats, foster strategic relationships between the culture, education and tourism sectors, and reach new audiences and markets (https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en).

Even before it won the national competition in 2016, Rijeka has been preparing for the ECoC 2020 title for years, in a very participatory way, including all key stakeholders. The main idea, proposed in the city's cultural strategy, was to transform rich industrial heritage into the necessary cultural infrastructure and new creative spaces and to promote the uniqueness of the city's history and identity through the slogan 'Port of Diversity'. Unfortunately, the ambitious plans for cultural revitalization of Croatia's largest port and industrial center were (temporarily) suspended very soon after the inauguration ceremony on February 1st 2020. In the context of significantly reduced public budgets following the implementation of coronavirus measures, a pandemic crisis management plan for Rijeka 2020 ECoC project included significant staff and other costs reductions. The opening of large infrastructure projects has been postponed from spring to the end of the year, and the program is focused more on the local scene, due to the impossibility of the arrival of many foreign participants. The European dimension of the project was also challenged by the imposed immobility and closing of borders.

The current situation in Rijeka illustrates serious problems facing the European Capitals of Culture: it even seems that a very complex and uncertain social, political and economic context call into question the future of this important cultural initiative. In this paper, the authors will elaborate great challenges faced by current and future title holders, Rijeka and Novi Sad, due to the corona virus pandemic. The conducted research included qualitative methodology, analysis of key documents and interviews with program managers and key stakeholders in Rijeka ECoC 2020 and Novi Sad ECoC 2021. The research results indicated that innovative approach of adapting the program to the situation and finding an innovative model to implement the planned projects in new circumstances, may best reflect the European spirit and endurance. On the other hand, it is obvious that the future of the project will be challenged not only by financial and technical issues, but also by emerging new formats, changing motives and expectations of increasingly immobile and jobless participants, closed beyond national borders, in search of a virtual European dimension.

**HISTORY OF THE EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE PROJECT**
The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is probably the most recognizable and one of the most prestigious EU's cultural initiative. It was created in 1985 with the goal of building ties between citizens of the European Union by celebrating both the diversity of European cultures and their common history and values. The event is also considered an opportunity to foster urban renewal through investment in culture and tourism. In the last 35 years more than 50 cities have participated, receiving significant funds from the EU to valorize their European cultural heritage and turn it into a lasting cultural and tourist product. There are an average of 500 events in the award year and each winner collects an average of 26.5 million euros from the different sources. The money raised for the program is invested in the cultural development of cities, the renovation of the old, and the construction of new cultural facilities and infrastructure. At the same time, the image of cities and their European identity and community is strengthening, so that cultural diversity ceases to be what divides, but becomes what unites.

The European Capitals of Culture action aims, in particular, to safeguard and promote the diversity of cultures in Europe, to widen access to and participation in culture, to strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and to raise the international profile of cities through culture (www.consilium.europa.eu). In time of economic crisis and growing political and social instability, culture can be a very powerful tool for social cohesion and inclusion, community involvement and sustainable development at all levels. By means of innovative valorisation and revitalization of the common European tangible and intangible heritage, creative industries and various forms of artistic expressions, such projects could help to resolve some of the acute socio-cultural problems, contributing to economic development, social stability and environmental protection.

The project has gone through several key phases in its history, from expensive festivals to investing in urban regeneration and cultural infrastructure. The increase in capital spending shows that manifestations have transformed from ordinary cultural celebrations into a means of economic and social image change (Palmer & Richards, 2007). From 2005 the cities from the new member states had the opportunity to request structural funds from the EU to increase the operating budget and thus renew the cultural infrastructure. As an alternative to megalomaniacal projects and spending money on expensive productions, which brought some of the previous capitals to the brink of bankruptcy, self-sustaining participatory models were introduced, which actively involved the local community in urban development processes, mobilized local cultural resources and activated existing heritage and creative potential. Within the cultural economy model, culture has become a key driver of sustainable urban development based on the strategic use of local culture, resources and participatory democracy (Urošević & Afrič, 2017). Creative reflection on European cultural and environmental alternatives included participatory models of "cultural citizenship", sustainable growth and solidarity, encouraged by digital technologies.

Celebrating 30 years of the European Capital of Culture and two years of EU accession, in 2015 Croatian cities Pula, Rijeka, Osijek and Dubrovnik have been shortlisted for this prestigious title in 2020. The main challenge for all candidates was to map the main cultural and creative resources and emphasize the elements of a common European identity and multicultural history. The winner should try to improve the range, diversity and European dimension of its cultural offer, including transnational cooperation, expand access and participation in culture, strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and improve international image using available
cultural resources. After evaluation of applications of Croatian candidates, a panel of independent experts assessed in May 2015 each bid against the six main criteria (contribution to the long term strategy, European dimension, cultural and artistic content, capacity to deliver, outreach and management) and chose Rijeka as the future capital.

As mentioned in the analysis of Croatian candidate cities (Urošević, 2015), a key challenge for all candidates was financial sustainability in the context of the current global recession and budget cuts as well as lack of experience and knowledge in the preparation of such projects. Faced with limited budgets, Croatian candidate cities and the winner had to be very creative in order to use the title to solve chronic problems in cultural and urban planning and revitalize neglected heritage, transforming former industrial comlex in new cultural quarters and creative districts. As an alternative to mega-projects and too expensive productions, which brought some of former ECoC (such as Maribor) to the brink of bankruptcy, sustainable participatory models of heritage management were proposed, which would actively involve local population in the process of sustainable urban development, mobilizing local cultural resources and activating existing heritage and creative potential.

Although there have been more and less successful examples in the history of the project, there are European good practice models of urban regeneration in the post-industrial harbour cities such as Glasgow, Liverpool, Genova and Marseille. In all these cities the ECoC programme was an opportunity for transformation of neglected industrial heritage in the city port into new creative districts with attractive museums and other cultural infrastructure. The event also improved the image of the cities, creating new jobs, attracting visitors and generating economic growth. The next stage of the project included a successful blend of cultural heritage and contemporary artistic production, as well as creative symbiosis and reinterpretation of tradition and modernity (Bologna, Bruges, Graz). For some cultural capitals, the title provided an opportunity to reflect on its marginal position and transform historical cultural quarters into popular creative districts (Lisbon, Helsinki, Cork, Pilsen, Kosice). In recent decades, the practice of revitalization and adaptive reuse of neglected industrial and military heritage and its transformation into innovative cultural laboratories, museums and creative clusters has already been established, so that the cities simply repeated successful models of urban regeneration (Tallin, Helsinki). The project was also an opportunity for reflection on sustainable alternatives and innovative participatory cultural citizenship models (San Sebastian, Umea), critique of totalitarian regimes through new media and artistic practices (Linz) as well as on historical (dis)continuities and utopias (Matera). For Marseille – the gateway to the Mediterranean, a bridge between Europe and Africa, the title was an opportunity for reflection on its multicultural heritage: after construction of the Museum of Euro-Mediterranean cultures and massive investments in creative resources, the city very soon transformed from a neglected port-city marked by migrations, problems with crime and racism into a very attractive cultural tourism destination. Current capitals should learn from their predecessors, because there really is an abundance of examples of good practice.

In the last decade, major infrastructure projects as a model came into question, as a result of the financial problems and reduced budgets due to the global recession in 2008. Several ECoCs faced delays in completion of the most important infrastructure projects, so that the complex crisis of the European Union reflected on the sustainability of the ECoC project. On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic called into question the entire reality we knew, and especially major cultural projects. Since ECoC is a combination of cultural festival and a massive...
investments in cultural infrastructure, there is great doubt how to reconcile it with the new era of required social (physical) distancing, budget cuts, growing immobility of cultural workers and closing borders.

In order to explore the impacts of the mentioned challenges on current and future ECoCs, the conducted research included qualitative methodology, analysis of key documents and interviews with program managers and key stakeholders in current and future ECoCs – Rijeka and Novi Sad. The semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2020 consisted of 12 questions related to the key elements of the ECoC programmes of both cities and major capital investments; changes in the planned programmes due to pandemic and models of adaptation to the unexpected situation; key challenges (financial, organizational) and possible positive aspect of current situation, expected legacy of the project after the title and recommendations for future capitals of culture as well as the impact of the pandemic on cultural sector.

RIJEKA ECoC 2020 – PORT OF DIVERSITY

The Rijeka application was based on the topic of 'Port of Diversity', which included three thematic areas: Water, Work and Migrations, as unique and recognizable elements of the local urban identity and at the same time very important European and global issues. The city emphasized its image as a multicultural and intercultural city, which is „the Croatian synonym for non-standard, liberal, anti-nationalist and tolerant”. It branded itself as recognizable for its alternative culture and a very strong civil sector. The ECoC programme included ambitious programmes of urban regeneration and transformation of the former industrial complex (factory 'Rikard Benčić') in the new cultural quarter with the museum of contemporary art and the city library (Urošević, 2015).

Rijeka is multicultural and intercultural city: today in the city of Rijeka live as many as 22 national minorities with 12 different religious communities. It can freely stand out as a city of revolutions and political changes. Its turbulent history has been written by many conquerors, monarchies and various nations that still inhabit its territory today. The water represents the city itself ('rijeka' means 'river'), a city that is surrounded on one side by the sea, while on land it abounds in freshwater springs. 'Flowing City'. On the other hand, the topic of water includes the ecological issue: how to preserve the natural environment in which it is located. As an industrial city, Rijeka wanted to show new technologies that help the current industry, its environmental efficiency and usefulness; differences between human labor and artificial intelligence (Rijeka 2020 ECoC, 2019).

The city of Rijeka started the restoration of its industrial heritage earlier, with smaller infrastructure projects. Obtaining the title of European Capital of Culture 2020 encouraged Rijeka to provide funds and manpower in order to valorize Rijeka's industrial heritage in the short term, which also prevented its further decline. The director of the company 'Rijeka 2020””, Irena Kregar Šegota, said in an interview conducted for the purposes of this research that special attention was paid to the industrial heritage, which can be seen through the renovation and valorization of former industrial buildings. The program of the planned renovation of industrial facilities within the ECoC was the industrial district 'Benčić', which includes 27,000 square
meters of industrial space that has been repurposed for cultural space. As part of the 'Benčić' complex, there is a creative laboratory called 'Children's House', the renovation of which began in 2019, and which aimed to involve children and parents in creative activities. Also, as part of the project 'Revitalization of the Benčić complex - Brick and T-building', the city library will move in on an area of 5,800 square meters (Kregar Šegota, interview, 2020). On October 10, 2006, the former Tito's ship Galeb, which was used for peacekeeping missions around the world, was declared a cultural property by the decision of the Directorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia. Renovation of the ship 'Galeb' began in 2019, and the project included the renovation and reconstruction of the ship, which will have a cultural purpose for a permanent museum exhibition, as well as a cinema, space for creative workshops, and whose complete renovation is expected by mid-2021.

With the opening ceremony on February 1, 2020, Rijeka officially became the European Capital of Culture. In addition to the spectacular inauguration, in front of more than 35,000 visitors and 235 accredited journalists, about 70 different cultural programs took place at over 30 locations over the next three days after the opening. Not long after that, Rijeka, like the rest of the world, was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, which was declared on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Rijeka found itself in an unenviable position, and had to change the entire planned program, prepared for a full four years, in an ungratefully short time. Not only was the arrival of foreign artists prevented, but also the audience, and the city and national budgets were changed, which dealt a very big financial blow to the whole project. The pandemic provided a new context in the reading of the program, and some new production requirements were put before the organizers, where most of the programs had to be moved to outdoor space. In addition, the measures of social distancing had to be adhered to, which means that the program intended for 10,000 people could not be implemented. Instead, programs were created for 300 visitors each. Programs that required the presence of foreign participants also had to be abandoned (Kregar Šegota, interview 2020). In addition to program adjustments, other transformations took place. The company 'Rijeka 2020' also had to be reorganized, so the team of 70 people now numbers 20, and the budget has been reduced by about 40%. Despite the problems, an extremely rich music and stage program took place throughout the summer on the streets, squares and in the 'Exportdvvo' exhibition space, and certain segments from the original project were transferred to the audiovisual, digital and virtual experience. Rijeka 2020 even in the era of the corona virus pandemic, which not only almost stopped the entire project of the European Capital of Culture, managed to organize a large number of events of different character, respecting all measures prescribed by the WHO and the national headquarters of the Republic of Croatia. various manifestations were seen by 54,000 people (Rijeka2020.eu).

As the first city in history, besides Galway in Ireland, to organize such a grand event in a pandemic of an unknown virus, Rijeka's experience will be valuable for cities yet to take the title, but also for anyone trying to preserve cultural life in extraordinary circumstances.

NOVI SAD ECoC 2021 – FOR NEW BRIDGES
Following positive experiences of other capitals, the project Novi Sad 2021 is envisaged as a platform for development of cultural and creative potentials of the city, whose goal for the following period is to strengthen cultural vitality of the city, enable urban regeneration, improve international image and tourist offer of Novi Sad. In this way, while working on the candidacy for the European Capital of Culture in 2021, the City of Novi Sad would develop its local concept and strategy of sustainable development of the cultural sector focusing on: strengthening institutions of culture, preserving cultural heritage, improving cultural participation, developing cultural and creative industries, decentralisation and inter-sector cooperation (novisad2021.rs).

When, as a city in candidate country for EU membership, in 2016 it applied for the title of European Capital of Culture, which is awarded to cities from these groups every year, they mentioned the promotion of cultural heritage - its protection and involvement of citizens in the process of its revitalization and active use as one of the six strategic goals and development rights of local cultural policies (EPC Novi Sad 2021, 2016). The city with harmonious coexistence of 21 ethnic communities has been awarded the title for 2021. Novi Sad acquired the status of a free royal city in 1748 in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and in the 19th century, with the founding of the 'Matica Srpska', it became the institutional seat of the Serbian national culture.

The program concept of Novi Sad within the ECoC project 'For new bridges' consists of four symbolic bridges that represent the values that are promoted: Freedom, Rainbow, Hope and Love. Each bridge has two program ports, in fact two thematic units, so that throughout the year there are a total of eight thematic units based on local identity and narratives, while promoting specific European values such as human rights, multiculturalism, intercultural dialogue, environmental awareness and peace policy. Within each bridge, flagship projects have been developed which have been selected on the basis of their artistic and creative concept and attractiveness in accordance with the principles of the program (Novi Sad 2021 – Program Concept 2018-2022, 2017).

Novi Sad based its application for the title of ECOC on the local art scene and monolithic heritage, primarily fortified heritage. The most important building of this type is certainly the Petrovaradin Fortress on the slopes of Fruška gora. Industrial heritage has never played a key role in the cultural heritage of Novi Sad, but in the last ten years the value of such buildings has been understood, so their valorization and revitalization has begun. Although the restoration of the industrial heritage began in 2010, it was only with the application and obtaining the title of ECOC that its full potential was realized. The 'Novi Sad 2021' Foundation has included almost all relics of industrial heritage on the territory of the city in the locations where the programs within the ECOC project will be held, which is why their restoration has begun or continued. From this example, as well as from the example of Rijeka as this year's European Capital of Culture, we can see the already mentioned importance of this project of the European Union. At the moment, several large capital infrastructure projects are being implemented, which include the adaptation and reinterpretation of the industrial cultural heritage in the city (Jovanov, interview 2020). The first is the revitalized old silk factory which was turned in 2018 into a cultural station in the ECOC project. Svilara is divided into four work spaces, so that it has a social center and cafe for local educators and NGOs, a concert hall for music and stage
performances, recording studio and space for entrepreneurs, individuals and organizations. It is a good example of adaptation and reinterpretation of industrial heritage, as by 2018 it was a completely ruined industrial facility (Novi Sad 2021 – Program Concept 2018-2022, 2017). According to the plans, Chinatown is located in the center of cultural and creative industries within the project Novi Sad 2021. Work on the revitalization of the buildings here began in 2010, with its transformation into an art center. The goal was to arrange the place to serve as a Youth Creative Quarter within the ECOC program, as well as to house studios, concert and exhibition spaces, workshops. In the interview conducted for this research, Jovanov points out that the organizers hopes that by 2022, a larger number of facilities within the Chinatown will be put to use (Jovanov, interview 2020).

Novi Sad has also developed a model of cultural stations, which aims to decentralize cultural content, develop the audience and adapt and activate different spaces throughout the city. The model of cultural stations implies the so-called bottom-up approach to engage citizens in the community as well as the independent cultural scene (artists and cultural organizations) to gain a platform for work and creative expression. From 2018 until today, five cultural stations have been activated - Eršeg, Svilara, Mlin, Rumenka and Bukovac (Jovanov, interview 2020).

Unlike the city of Rijeka, Novi Sad was in the middle of preparations to become an ECOC when the WHO declared the Covid-19 pandemic on April 11, 2020. WHO recommendations on measures against diseases such as keeping a distance, wearing masks and avoiding crowds were inconsistent with the events that are part of the ECOC program and imply mass participation of local communities as audiences. While Rijeka had to adapt and change its 'on the go' programme, Novi Sad had a whole year to make changes, but the task was not much easier. In the interview, Lazar Jovanov points out that the changes in the program are primarily those in the way of thinking and evaluating, because the risk that no one counted on is taken into account. In program planning, digital expression backups were first made and the programs went through pilot phases of capacity testing (Jovanov, interview 2020). It turned out that digital programs in cultural stations designed to replace standard ones aroused great interest among citizens. Certain programs, such as the play 'Pope John', had more than 7,500 views, and the content reached a total of 80,000 people, which is much more than the number who would physically visit this type of program during August.

The positive side when it comes to the ECOC project in Novi Sad is that, according to the organizing team, Novi Sad has not given up on any of the planned projects. Although the finances are still not stable and not all the necessary funds for the project have been provided, in addition to the EU award of 1.5 million euros, the program is financed by the city, provincial and republic governments, as well as the mentioned European funds.

**THE FUTURE OF THE ECOC PROJECT**

As analyzed in this paper, the ECOC project has become a very strong brand that requires participating cities to get the most out of their year. They practically come to the privileged situation that thanks to such a mega-event they receive not only European and national financial
support, but also new forms of networking among cities with the same title, and citizen participation in the initiative (Nemeth, 2015).

The European Capital of Culture was established in order to emphasise richness and diversity of European cultures, strengthen cultural connections between citizens of Europe, connect people from different European countries, meet other cultures, promote mutual understanding and strengthen the sense of Europeanism. The most important heritage of the project is placing culture in the very centre of social development and seeing culture as the key factor for economic development of the society founded on knowledge, innovation and creativity. Many capitals of culture used this opportunity to develop cultural infrastructure, enable wider access to culture, improve image of their cities, develop tourist economy, and strengthen cultural and creative industries during the project and after it (novisad2021.rs).

As elaborated in this paper, due to pandemic, European Capitals of Culture have had to postpone or cancel their cultural programmes since March 2020. Bearing in mind all the challenges faced by this year ECoCs, in October 2020 the Council adopted proposal which would allow the cities of Galway in Ireland and Rijeka in Croatia, designated as European Capitals of Culture for 2020, to continue implementing their programmes until 30 April 2021. The extension of the programmes into 2021 is intended to partly compensate the two cities for the loss and shed an increased light on the activities of both ECOC 2020 in the early months of 2021. The preventive measures have slowed down the preparatory work of the three Capitals of Culture designed for 2021, with the economic survival of potential contracting partners being uncertain, therefore the Commission has recommended postponement of Timișoara and Elefsina to 2023, and Novi Sad from 2021 to 2022 (www.consilium.europa.eu).

CONCLUSION

The conducted analysis pointed out the (partial) unsustainability of the existing models of European Capitals of Culture as mass year-long cultural festivals, expensive productions and capital infrastructure investments in the framework of the global crisis and budget cuts. It is also obvious that already well-established models that were useful for European cultural capitals from the beginning of the project are not always feasible in crisis conditions on the European periphery, where local communities have very specific social and economic problems, which cannot always be solved by mass festivals and new cultural infrastructure. Culture is certainly a cohesive factor and could be useful in recreating European identity, but in global crisis conditions the priority should be economic and social stabilization and investment in key industries. In this context, rich European industrial heritage should be reactivated for production purposes, and not just serve as a context for art installations.

The research results indicated that innovative approach of adapting the program to the situation and finding an innovative model to implement the planned projects in new circumstances, may best reflect the European spirit, endurance and resilience. On the other hand, it is obvious that the future of the project will be challenged not only by financial and technical issues, but also by emerging new formats, changing motives and expectations of increasingly immobile and jobless participants, closed beyond national borders, in search of a virtual European dimension.
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