

RIFS-Blogpost

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Chemnitz: Harnessing Public Participation in a European Capital of Culture

The much-coveted title of “European Capital of Culture” isn’t always good news for residents. Surprisingly, winning the title is often associated with a decline in the wellbeing and satisfaction of citizens with city life. Following its successful bid for Capital of Culture status in 2025, Chemnitz is pursuing an approach that focuses on public participation and aims to improve social cohesion and quality of life in addition to boosting the city’s reputation. Students from a joint seminar held at RIFS and Chemnitz University of Technology have analysed the social sustainability of a number of Capital of Culture projects.

While most cities granted the title of “European Capital of Culture” (ECoC) have favoured a high-brow mega-event approach to programming, Chemnitz has taken a different tack. The city’s planning objectives, the composition of stakeholders, and programme design credibly reflect the intention of delivering an ECoC that will serve the local population. However, preparations for the ECoC year, including lead-in programme items, give cause for concern.

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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The gap between idea and reality became apparent with the start of the first main project, the Apple Tree Parade. The concept for the parade, which would cross property boundaries across the city, was developed by artist Barbara Holub, who hoped to strengthen people's sense of community through a series of unsealing, greening, and planting events. The project would also address topics such as human-environment relations, land management, and food systems.

A few months after the initial plantings in November 2021, Stefan Schmidtke, Managing Director of the European Capital of Culture 2025 gGmbH, pulled the plug on the project, citing opposition from citizens and a lack of acceptance for the project's artistic merits. The concept was overhauled and the trees are now being planted elsewhere. In an open letter, a number of artists criticised the city's approach as lacking in transparency and harmful to the city's credibility. Already, in the earliest days of the ECoC, it had become clear that arts and culture don't always bring a city together, but can also give rise to considerable conflicts.

The Chemnitz ECoC organisers want to involve the entire population and activate the "silent middle". So it seems only logical to take public opposition seriously. However, an analysis of the start-up phase of the Capital of Culture Chemnitz by Brichzin et al. shows how difficult this can be in a highly polarised city like Chemnitz. As Baecker writes, the creatives, artists, and consultants involved in the development of the ECoC concept struggled to define the city and sketch out the terrain for their interventions. Wishing to avoid any premature exclusion – and too clear an inclusion – they attributed a "Culture of Making" to the former industrial and engineering centre, suggesting that the city could flee from an indeterminate present into an open future.

But is it even possible to reach a large part of the urban population with ECoC projects? Studies of previous iterations suggest that 50 to 70 per cent of the local population attend at least one cultural event in an ECoC year. However, it is less clear that local populations actually benefit from the title "European Capital of Culture". An analysis of the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970-2002 shows that overall satisfaction with city life tended to fall in cities hosting the Capital of Culture. Statistically speaking, there is little to suggest that Chemnitz will achieve its declared goal of "improving the quality of life in public spaces in neighbourhoods." The reasons for this are likely to be similar to those affecting other mega-

events: higher tourist volumes, noise, crowding in public spaces and transport systems, and a rise in property prices. Such negative effects impact low-income population groups in particular, who are also less likely to attend Capital of Culture events.

However, the ECoC programme aims to achieve more than improving citizens' satisfaction with life in the city. The organisers also hope to make the city more attractive overall, foster fundamental European values, strengthen collective self-efficacy and activate the so-called "silent middle". As far as the latter is concerned, civil society actors involved in the ECoC are sceptical ([Laux, 2021](#)). However, it is precisely this section of the population that could be decisive for the goal of cultivating fundamental European values.

If it is not possible to convince the majority of the city's population of the benefits of the Capital of Culture, social divisions could even be exacerbated and fundamental European values weakened. After all, if this explicitly European project leaves citizens feeling more like victims than co-creators, Eurosceptics are likely to distance themselves even more from the pro-European segments of society that initiated and promoted the bid for the ECoC title.

Students attending the seminar "On the way to a more sustainable Chemnitz? Exploring Capital of Culture projects", which was organised by the RIFS together with Chemnitz University of Technology, have taken a closer look at the projects and spoken to local residents.

A group of students who studied an artistic project in the Fritz-Heckert Housing Estate concluded that people are becoming increasingly critical of the Capital of Culture project – including locals who volunteered to support public participation processes and thus share one of its key objectives. This backlash is thought to be driven by poor communication and the inadequate implementation of participation processes. There is a gap between what the Capital of Culture wants to be and how locals perceive it. However, the project itself has potential and will bring together artists and locals to reflect on the stigma associated with high-rise prefabricated housing and the contrast between internal and external perceptions of life on the estate. The students acknowledged both the topic's relevance and use of artistic methods to open up new possibilities for communication, social practice, and political participation.

Another project centres on plans to restore Chemnitz's old bathing beach.

Here too, locals have yet to be properly involved. In a survey, they expressed concern about possible noise pollution and damage to the environment caused by increased visitor numbers. The survey also revealed little enthusiasm among locals for the planned construction of a new bridge, with many critical of the costs.

The lead-in phase for the Capital of Culture year commenced in 2021 and paints a sobering picture. In their bid for the Capital of Culture title, the organisers foregrounded the overarching goal of strengthening European identity and improving quality of life and social cohesion in Chemnitz in addition to boosting the city's reputation. The lack of progress towards these goals may simply be due to errors in communication and poorly managed participation. However, it is possible that the Capital of Culture concept – even with its focus on public participation – is ill-suited to achieving these objectives. For one thing, locals are likely to experience all of the burdens commonly associated with such mega-events. Secondly, in a highly polarised city like Chemnitz, it is difficult to do justice to the aspiration that the cultural programme should appeal to the majority of citizens. The failure of the Apple Tree Parade clearly shows that artistic projects can create new problems or bring longstanding conflicts to the surface. Sometimes they can also contribute to their resolution, but little of this has been seen in Chemnitz so far.

