

ECOC 2021 CULTURAL STRATEGIES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SHORTLISTED ROMANIAN EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE CANDIDATE CITIES

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Abstract. *In an increasingly competitive global market, European cities are faced with the challenge of developing a complex and cohesive urban strategy. In this context, the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) title can help cities with a lower international visibility gain various cultural, financial, and social opportunities by engaging in a rigorous selection process. In the bid for the ECoC 2021 title, Romanian cities had the chance to develop complex cultural strategies. This paper focuses on the analysis of the ECoC title applications of the four Romanian finalists (Baia Mare, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and the eventual laureate city of Timișoara). These case studies are centered on the proposed cultural strategies and how the candidate cities envision their position in the European dimension in 2021, in terms of urban development and city branding. By focusing on how the applications aim to reach and implement the ECoC 2020-2033 Specific Objectives (SO), the analysis will emphasize the distinctions and similarities in each city's attempts to gain the title. Though the proposed cultural strategies have significant differentiations in terms of vision and cultural outreach initiatives, all four of them emphasized a strong predilection towards European values. Taking into account the scope of the ECoC program, the Romanian candidate cities' proposals have integrated the European Union values, while also devising projects and activities aimed at celebrating the local culture and heritage. In the present study, we will also explore the way the proposals encompass and highlight the concepts of community and cultural mosaic, important elements throughout the four candidacies and ECoC Guidelines. The case study contributes to the evolving field of city branding in the European context by having an initial contribution to the research area in relation to the Romanian ECoC candidate cities, a complex endeavor that can result in more varied research pertaining to this topic.*

Keywords: *urban development; place branding; European City of Culture; urban strategy; town center management; urban entrepreneurialism; place culture.*

Introduction

The 2021 ECoC title is an international endeavor, which will focus on cities from three countries: Romania, Greece, and a third city from a candidate or potential candidate country, a statement to the European Union's aspiration for continuous development. On 16th September 2016, Timișoara was chosen as Romania's representative. In the

present competitive global market, an ECoC title can garner international attention for an urban area and bolster the local development initiatives.

The initiative of creating a European city of Culture (ECC) was launched in 1983 and resulted in the 1985 selection of one city for the title by the European Council; this process continued each year until 1999. The intergovernmental action was seen as a set of symbolic initiatives aimed at creating a sense of common belonging ranging from the flag to the anthem, to a new ritual calendar, while at the same time respecting the contents of national and local cultures (Sassateli, 2002). The ECC title referred to a community that does not lie in the tangible relations and binding ties between its people but exists as a reality of the mind, as the image of community its members share (Sassateli, 2002). When ECC changed to ECoC (European Capital of Culture) it entailed a total 're-contextualization' of the cities, where multiculturalism and ethnic diversity have been adopted as a part of the 're-branding' process. Over the decades, the program has transitioned from a cultural initiative to a significant social, political, and economic factor in the local, national, and EU policies including various geographical, political, moral, cultural and pragmatic meanings (Lähdesmäki, 2012).

The main goal of this study is to analyze the cultural strategies of the four finalist ECoC cities from Romania, with an emphasis on how they incorporated and plan on reaching the ECoC 2020-2033 Specific Objectives (SO) into their proposals. This research emphasizes the distinctions and similarities in each city's overall cultural strategy, with a focus on urban development, city branding, and community input.

Urban development

The European Capital of Culture, a mega-event reserved for European Union states, is one of the first cultural initiatives developed based on European membership, as a way to generate cultural coherence (Oancă, 2015), a primary goal which has since morphed into a strong competition among member-states, given its perception as a 'major urban development catalyst' (Tölle, 2016, p.376). The ECoC concept presupposes a notable degree of integration and mobilization, from the cultural elite and business sphere to the local public, as it can regenerate deprived urban areas and convey their image on an international scale (Tölle, 2016).

Though an ECoC title can entail an image rebranding for the designated city (Mooney, 2004), as a means to rejuvenate or increase tourism, the underlying cultural elements serve as a basis for the future initiatives. In the current economic landscape, a shift towards a service-oriented economy has translated culture into a commodity with market value, placing it at the center of urban development (Garcia, 2004). It has also paved the way toward a tendency of making the production or urban spaces a more transparent process, as a result of transitioning from a more urban marketing approach to a broader city branding initiative, as well as more localized plans regarding urban regeneration in the European Union (Garcia, 2004). Though urban growth strategies can vary in goal and scope, depending on the local necessities and opportunities (Savitch & Kantor, 2003), it's clear they encourage cities or regions to have an edge in an increasingly competitive market.

With a three-pronged approach--urban regeneration, creation and rejuvenation of cultural facilities, and cultural events--the ECoC title can have a major impact on a city's center, where heritage can be exploited to encourage economic regeneration and artistic expression (Balsas, 2004), through strategic investment and an overall cohesive vision. *Town center management* (TCM) (Warnaby, 2005, p.184) becomes one of the main ways in which traditional urban retail areas have attempted to counter the threat from increased retail provision in off-center locations. Traditional town centers have an important role in the provision of social infrastructure and cultural heritage vitalized by retailing which has been conceptualized as a 'secondary' element of place product (Warnaby, 2005, p.185).

Engaging in solid development strategies in the quest of offering distinct, unique experiences has led to implementing events as a major component of economic and urban development strategy, in a process called 'eventification' (Jakob, 2012, p.448). In the ECoC context, urban festivals and other cultural events contribute to a positive image and economic growth bringing together stakeholders who will provide a competitive image, which can result in *festivalization*, an important part of the urban regeneration of post-socialist economies and involves foreign new urban identities (Johansson & Kociatkeiwicz, 2011, p.393).

This tendency also has the added bonus of including local stakeholders and producers of cultural products (such as local artists) in urban growth initiatives (Jakob, 2012). Culture could be a solid ground for city branding with positive influence on urban development (Zbucnea, 2014). The local public's relation to urban development, either its full inclusion or quasi-exclusion from the overarching strategy and vision, can also impact the success of an urban development infrastructure. Residents' attitudes can play a major role in the success of urban progress in regards to facets such as tourism (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003).

In order to gain a hold in the increasingly competitive international market, a city bent on urban development needs to also focus on community development and less privileged neighborhoods, integrating them into the larger rejuvenation scheme and political structure of influence, a tendency which has grown in the European Union with positive results (Savitch & Kantor, 2003; Christiaens et al., 2007). Turning to cultural institutions, such as museums, as a means of community growth and reducing discrepancies based on social capital is also prevalent in today's socio-economic landscape (Message, 2009).

In an era of globalization, networking on an international scale is also perceived as being an element that can offer an added bonus in contemporary competitive context, with the European Union strives for connecting the member-states to the global economy (Pain et al., 2016).

The ECoC program involves changes of the city image and communication, branding or marketing strategies as Lähdesmäki's (2012) studies concluded. The candidate cities' attempts to become more attractive to investors and tourists, can lead, in some cases to reducing multiple, diverse social realities and lived experienced into a readily consumable package (Jones, 2004, p.352). Brenner (1999, p.446) presented the concept of *urban entrepreneurialism* considering that today, municipal EU governments are embracing urban strategies which entail construction places for

industrial development (office centers, industrial parks, telematics networks, transport and shipping terminals and various types of retail, entertainment, and cultural facilities). Jones (2004) added that the adoption of urban entrepreneurialism also requires the emergence of an elite-based growth coalition, reflecting wider trends in local economic policy. Nonetheless, Jones concludes that a city (e.g. Liverpool) might experience a record of cultural innovation, but still be the home of extreme inequalities and noted that ECoC will engender a 'policy that celebrates marginality rather than seeking to redress it' (Jones, 2004, p.353). ECoC understands regions like competing firms that should be actively marketed as a 'product' in the area of economic development policy (Brenner, 2003, p.298).

City branding

Most urban areas have to compete with internationally renowned locations, which have a clear, defined image. In the attempt to garner an increasingly larger number of tourists, numerous strategies with a cultural basis are employed, such as festivals, museums, art shows, stadiums, etc. (Gotham, 2001).

The Treaty of Lisbon and the European Agenda for culture stress the unity and the diversity as the key features of European cultural identity and understands cultural heritage as a shared legacy of Europeanness with a profoundly important role in the current production of commonality and integration within the EU (Lähdesmäki, 2012, p.191). In various EU policy documents diverse regional and national heritage sites and monuments are often 'Europeanized' – represented as European and as a part of common European cultural identity (Lähdesmäki, 2012, p.192).

The ECoC program includes cities that integrate various European themes and integrate the collaboration between artists and other cultural actors from different member states into the 'invention' of Europe as a cultural entity (Warnaby, 2013, p. 348). In this context, we find important to discuss the concept of *place branding* which can be seen as socially constructed meaning systems (Warnaby, 2013, p.399).

Seen as a more developed concept of *place marketing*, which focused on the importance of 'selling' an appropriate image of the place through the construction of narratives relating to its potential to create a sense of place 'attachment', *place branding* has a dual aim: to form a 'unique selling proposition' that will secure visibility to the outside and to reinforce 'local identity' to the inside with stories about it (Colomb & Kalandides as cited in Warnaby, 2013, p.346). Re-branding a place implies re-inventing the city through 'place myths' (Warnaby, 2013, p.347) with the purpose to make the city attractive for external investment. The place brand is a living concept which becomes an open-end process, within which a range of place stakeholders will participate (Warnaby, 2013, p.350) especially in ECoC program. Place brands are articulations within discourses, in specific 'vocabularies of images' and transformed into a social reality (Pasquinelli, 2014, p.730).

The European dimension of a cultural capital includes both the concept of place attachment, which can be understand as an affective bond or link between people and specific places known also as *topophilia*, and the concept of place detachment which arise from negative memories/experiences and/or historical events that are difficult to

reconcile (Warnaby, 2013, p.350). Warnaby (2013) suggests that even if a place provokes bad memories or unpalatable histories, that does not mean there will be an automatic sense of detachment. The notion of *thanatourism* and the connections people feel with places such as concentration camps (e.g. Auschwitz), battlefield sites and other similar harrowing sites shows that such places can both repeal and attract simultaneously. To connect with our cities bidbooks proposals, we can understand that both Timisoara and Bucharest began their presentation with their reminiscences of communism and the struggle to incur a European identity despite their historic consequences. Internal brand strength consists of the brand commitment and the brand citizenship behavior dimensions (Bregoli, 2012).

Tourist destination brand image focuses on the critical need for stakeholder involvement in order to help a region through a long-term strategy by increasing employment and boosting economic growth. Tourist destination brand image also focuses on 'adding value in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values which match their needs more closely' and directly affects tourists' intention to visit (Ashton, 2014, p.281).

In the competitive landscape of city branding, designing an image which differentiates one destination among the multitude of tourist locations available at any given time is crucial (Pike, 2010). Without a clearly defined identity, destination branding strategies can fall short, especially in today's socio-economic context, where abrupt events on a macro-environmental scale can derail a branding initiative or damage the image of a destination (Baker & Cameron, 2007). Coherence in branding strategy is key, as uneven attempts can lead to a decrease in tourism yield. In order to accommodate the growing demands of the tourism market, Baker, and Cameron (2007, p.92) have identified four stages of destination brand building based on success factors: strategic orientation, destination identity and image, stakeholder involvement, and implementation, monitoring, and review.

Place identity and place branding are interwoven processes (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), though distinct, with a basis in the geographical and cultural characteristics of a given destination (Hudson et al., 2016). The strategy takes its incipient characteristics from the local expression of cultural features and accentuating them into grounded concepts, vital for the creation of a brand image (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

A major component in place identity creation is *place culture*, which is understood as 'a way of life as this is experienced and created by the people that live in a place, therefore providing the context for internal definitions of place identity' (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p.78). Accentuating the cultural component humanizes a destination, providing personality, defined as 'the set of human characteristics associated with a destination' (Ekinici & Hosany, 2006, p.127), which can have a positive impact on the image. Urban branding initiatives can lend themselves to personification and make use of architecture and design as a means of creating a coherent image (Neill, 2001).

Given Europe's cultural diversity, attracting tourists based on cultural hubs pertaining to specific minority expressions isn't a new phenomenon, but it has recently increased in popularity (Murieșianu, 2014). The discussion of diverse heritage is particularly prominent in ECoC strategies, representing a great opportunity for development regarding regions where minority cultures can be seen as enriching the core culture,

some of them even being recognized as 'national' minorities (Ashworth et al., 2007, p.142).

Case study analysis

The ECoC Selection Panel's Pre-Selection Stage report noted that the 2021 candidacy is the first time cities in Romania have developed specific cultural strategies based on a cultural program dimension against six criteria: contribution to the long-term strategy of the city, European dimension, cultural and artistic content, capacity to deliver, outreach and management. The case study revolves around the four finalist cities' proposals for the ECoC title, by analyzing their respective cultural strategies. The research question our analysis stemmed from is:

What cultural strategies did each Romanian finalist candidate city develop in order to meet the ECoC 2020-2033 Specific Objectives?

This research question encompasses our main goal, that of detailing the candidate cities' proposals in terms of European vision and cultural development initiatives. This analysis is based on the four ECoC 2020-2033 SOs:

SO1: Enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities, including through transnational cooperation

SO2: Widen access to and participation in culture.

SO3: Strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors.

SO4: Raise the international profile of cities through culture.

Analysis of the ECoC 2021 proposals

Baia Mare

The city assumed an 'entrepreneurial vision for our endeavor' (BM, p.7) and also implemented some planned cultural changes in the preparation stage. As Baia Mare is the 'main gateway to Maramureş County' (BM, p.7), the proposal highlights the region's cultural variety and rich tourism opportunities in the four historical counties: Chioarului, Lăpuşului, Codrului and the Historic Maramureş. One of the emphases in the candidacy is increasing the development between urban and rural communities in their shared goal of development while underlining the region's uniqueness and regional assets (amongst which are the eight churches listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites). In terms of regional cooperation, a protocol of collaboration has been established between the cities in the metropolitan area in order to further enhance the overall cultural program.

The overall vision detailed in the proposal stems from *The Culture of Hosting*, the conceptual engine of the initiative, which encompasses the region's 'ability to understand, accommodate, integrate and value different cultures' (BM, p.10) in a multicultural international context. Further detailing this approach, the proposal accentuates the 'four steps of hosting'--Meet (*Open Maps*), Greet (*New Nomads*), Show (*Portal. Sings and Rituals*), Share (*Translating (Hi)Story*). The program is designed to 'reconfirm European traditional topics' (BM, p.20), while also acknowledging the impact mass media has on audiences' perception. The proposal details numerous international projects which Baia Mare wants to participate in, such as *Global Biopolitics*, *125 Years of Women & Art*, etc., with a strong emphasis on European and international co-production endeavors with regions such as South America and Central

Asia, as well as highlighting initiatives which focus on community backgrounds, such as *Performing Foods*. The entire framework of the cultural program can be summed up in 'Think Locally, Act Globally' (BM, p.24). The proposal also highlights the social inclusion of the Roma community, as well as placing culture at 'the heart of city development' (BM, p.15). In line with the overall marginalized communities, several projects have been proposed, such as *Rebuilding Babel*, which will focus on 'the heavily polluted old industrial area of the city' (BM, p.30), while others focus on exhibiting the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the region (*Instagrammer*, etc.).

The cultural strategy revolves around establishing the city and region as 'an independent cultural sector' (BM, p.12) with a multicultural community, and establishing a strong economy with a regional tech hub which can develop on an international scale, and ecotourism, with the main goal of producing 'evolution, rather than just change' (BM, p.12). Apart from the technological industry, Baia Mare proposes a culturally-driven development of other areas of expertise such as the textile industry and enabling 'trans-sectorial research results as open-source data for investors and operators' (BM, p.14).

The proposal also includes several events to bolster the region's economy and image through culture, such as *Know Now Festival*, *The Old Calendar*, etc., with each month of 2021 being marked by celebrations pertaining to a specific part of Romanian folk mythology and culture (*Summer Fairies* for June, etc.). Their initiatives also give a sense of combining old traditions with new technologies, in order to create a sustainable, long-term tourism industry in the region. The pregnant local authenticity is a point repeated throughout the proposal, as it gives the bid the uniqueness so intrinsic to ECoC, which can be explored in terms of tourism. In terms of urban infrastructure, the city planned to explore the potential of public spaces with 'human scale cultural equipment' (BM, p.60) in a '*City as a stage*' initiative, by employing the tactic of trials and experiments before implementing major changes, as well as rehabilitating patrimony buildings.

Bucharest

The Bucharest proposal insists on the paradoxical nature of the city in a continuous struggle with its unresolved contradictions between Western logos and Balkan ethos, socialist past and neoliberal laissez-faire present in order to create an identity (B, p.5). Bucharest2021 introduces the notion of the *fragmented city* and presents the capital of Romania as an *archipelago*: the city's human scale urban planning and architecture was fractured for the first time at the end of the 19th century by the construction of monumental buildings under plans for modernizing the capital. In the 1980s, more than one-third of the historic center was demolished to make room for the gigantic House of the People (now hosting the Parliament). This traumatic fragmentation of the city's urban tissue has irreversibly shaped the city, disconnecting the city center from the neighboring quarters and fragmenting the central area into isolated neighborhoods (B, p.5).

The concept of the *invisible city* was inspired by Italo Calvino's novel and suggesting the idea that art makes the invisible visible and serves as a vital perspective on Bucharest and European urban culture. In terms of European Culture, Bucharest2021 insists on the partnerships with other ex-communist cities from Central Europe, and it

also puts a stress on the *EUroma* project and on the *Museum of Multiculturality* founding in accordance with DELI Programme.

Bucharest2021 insists on the activity of a Bucharest-Ilfov Regional Development Agency (BIRDA) as a regional administration of the funds on both a national and European level responsible for the regional strategic investment for the period 2014-2020 and accentuates the regional perspective as a significant part of cultural tourism.

Bucharest branding paradigm sees the city as a tourist destination, as a knowledge city and as historic 'monuments' (B, p.), all of them contributing to a balanced urban development and mentions the six steps of a global city (local, regional, national, super-national, continental, global) underlying that a cultural capital is not only a matter of size but also of interconnectivity.

Bucharest proposal also explores the TCM concept and insists that in many neighborhoods, shopping malls are now the only alternative for spending free time and stands for the creation of a cultural ecosystem of the city where hackathons, Balkan Express program cluster, contemporary arts, and civic initiative will redesign the space in surrounding areas.

Cluj-Napoca

Cluj-Napoca boasts an eclectic mix of artistic and cultural programs renowned on both a national and international level. Their ECoC proposal has the slogan 'East of West', which encompasses their overall vision of 're-signifying Europe beyond East and West' (CN, p.15), a process of 'social transformation' (CN, p.23) by bridging the East-West gap through 'a mutual transfusion of knowledge' (CN, p.15).

In terms of transnational cooperation, which has 'a transversal priority' (CN, p.17), the proposal focuses on artistic co-production initiatives (such as the *Artist-In-Residence* or *New Media* programs) with European partners and cultural operators from neighboring countries such as Republic of Moldavia, Hungary, Bulgaria, etc. One of the goals is to support the career development of transnational artists and 'active citizenship and entrepreneurship' by people from different countries (CN, p.82) through multilingual programs such as *Creative Europe 2014-2020* and *Europe for Citizens 2014-2020*. The *ECoC Candidate Cities Network* was also launched in Cluj-Napoca in 2016, with the city agreeing upon a memorandum of cooperation with Baia Mare 2021 (CN, p.21).

A high degree of community participation to cultural endeavors is highlighted in *The Open Academy of Change* initiative and the *Jivipen* project (geared towards the Roma population). Another important initiative is the *Integram* project, which will have a platform where 'these different cultures meet and enter into a creative dialogue' (CN, p.75). Other projects, such as the *InClujing You* initiative is aimed at cultural enclaves of foreign students studying in Cluj-Napoca, such as the French or Moldavian students.

With culture presented as the 'creator of new meanings' (CN, p.22), the proposal continues with its re-signifying vision by elaborating a three-tier approach: *Culture Inspires* (re-signifying art practice in context), *Culture Connects* (re-signifying the intercultural experience), and *Culture Works* (re-signifying 'work, authenticity, place

making, innovation and strategic distribution' (CN, p.23). The *Open Academy of Change*-'strategy to develop human capacities and generate opportunities for participation and cocreation' (CN, p. 77)—encompasses all of them. Activities range from *Culture Therapy in Hospitals* and *The Museum of Broken Relationships* to *The European Center for Contemporary Arts* (with its three programs, *Visual Arts*, *New Media Arts* and *Performing Arts*).

The city aims to increase 'capacity of our citizens, organizations, and community' (CN, p.23). The cultural program developed for the ECoC year will have a basis in the city's multi-ethnic heritage, with Romanian, Hungarian, and Roma symbols being integrated into the creative outcome (CN, p.65). Though Cluj-Napoca has an 'impressive cultural infrastructure' (CN, p.67), the objective is to reinforce and develop this position through the ECoC title, as well as bolster the city's urban and tourism infrastructures with initiatives such as *Someş River Rehabilitation*, *Transylvania Cultural Centre*.

With the title of 'Silicon Valley of Romania' (CN, p.4), Cluj-Napoca boasts a diverse IT sector, which it plans on developing fully, from outsourcing to a sustainable industry. The proposal includes initiating the "spillover effect", the productive influence of cultural processes on creative industries, by developing new hybrid models of production of value at a European scale' (CN, p.11). Though Cluj-Napoca has some of the most well-known Romanian events on an international scale, such as *TIFF (Transylvania International Film Festival)*, *Electric Castle* and *Untold* festivals, the proposal mentions the city's goal is to 'be an eventful place, instead of becoming a festival-ised city' (CN, p.6).

Timișoara

In terms of European dimension, Timișoara has shown an 'increased sensitivity towards its European mosaic' (TM, p.20) and proposed two programs in order to celebrate their European diversity: *Light over borders* and *Moving fireplaces*. Their programs, seen as a *European Journey*, are based not only on the different languages spoken by the historic ethnic groups but also on the languages of new communities such as Arabic, Asian and Italian minorities. Timișoara has also established transnational partnerships with cities from Serbia, Hungary, Croatia and Germany and with some of them collaborate in *Light over borders*. In the *Dare!* initiative, the city will engage residents of Timișoara in a trans-neighborhood dialogue.

Comprehended as a *European journey*, access and participation in cultural activities are based on three key terms: *People*, *Places*, and *Connections*. As we demonstrated in the literature review above, the three terms can be easily linked with the stakeholders involved in the development of the region in order to reach a European dimension. The stakeholders are invited to *Power Station Project* which redefines the international profile of Timișoara not only in terms of culture but also in terms of technology. *The Station Player of Change* is built on the spirit of 1989 revolution and brings into the spotlight the change makers of today, in their diversity of form and expression (TM, p.38). The trail *Invisible/visible* deconstruct stereotypes of Roma communities, not only in the Timișoara and Banat region but also in Europe, encouraging vulnerable groups to get involved in the cultural representation.

Timișoara's proposal empowers citizens to co-curate and tell the story of the city through *Spotlight Heritage* trial and gives public spaces a voice through design and architecture interventions. By organizing a multilingual festival--*Mega Bega*--Timișoara celebrates a Europe of diversity and interdependence through theater, films, music, land art, and interaction.

Moving Fireplaces Festival raises the international profile of the city by telling the past stories of people on-the-move and sensitizing the public in order to raise awareness on the effects of xenophobia and intolerant behavior. The name of the festival is a metaphor; the fireplace is a symbol of comfort, safety, and warmth (TM, p.54).

In the future, Timișoara aims to brand itself as a point meeting of IT&C and Culture and encourages cross-border exchange. Timișoara focuses its strategy on the strong connection with the other cities in the region and highlights its strategic position in the heart of the cross-border region emphasizing the key role of creative industries. The proposal insists on the concept of tolerance in a space with over 30 different cultures.

Discussions

As detailed above, the European dimension is highlighted throughout all four proposals, yet it has a pregnant contribution in Timișoara's candidacy. Another important aspect is that of social inclusion, the topic of numerous proposed projects in all four cities, emphasizing the macro-environmental changes at a European level.

Though all four cities based their initiatives on the cultural heritage and expressions, Baia Mare's proposal highlighted local folklore and integrated it into the cultural strategy, managing to create projects and activities which bring traditional characteristics into the 21st-century tourism trends.

While transnational cooperation initiatives were a significant part of all the bid books, Cluj-Napoca's proposal, stemming from their 'East of West' perspective, managed to encompass a much broader vision relating to international collaboration projects.

Bucharest's bid is largely influenced by its communist past, but the desire to adhere to a more Western image is emphasized in its strategy. Though the city has faced harrowing events in the past, the proposal signifies a shift towards a European vision.

Throughout the proposal analysis, differentiations in terms of vision and cultural outreach initiatives have been identified. Taking into account the scope of the ECoC program, the Romanian candidate cities' proposals were imbued with European Union values, their projects and activities coherently aimed at celebrating the local culture and heritage, while also geared towards reaching the ECoC 2020-2033 SOs, with the different variations highlighted in the research section. Our case study analysis delineates local cultural strategies in a European context, a field which can be further expanded in future research.

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Case Study Materials (ECoC 2021 Bid Books)

- Baia Mare Bid Book (Baia Mare2021) – *Culture of Hosting*. (2nd Application).
- Bucharest Bid Book (Bucharest2021) – *in-visible city*. (2nd Application).
- Cluj-Napoca Bid Book (Cluj-Napoca2021) – *East of West*. (2nd Application).
- Timișoara Bid Book (TM2021). *Shine your light - Light up your city!* (2nd Application).