

The European Capital of Culture and Transnational Networks

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In Europe, building transnational networks has become a crucial means for realizing bottom-up Europeanization and implementing the European Union (EU) policy at the grassroots. The value of transnational networks lies in clarifying political exchanges, decision making and policy transfer below the EU level. As a core element of the EU's cultural action, the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) is an important vehicle to promote transnational cooperation. However, whether in theory or practice, transnational networks among ECOC host cities have not received much attention from academia. Based on a qualitative meta-analysis, this study offers a holistic overview of the experiences of the ECOC programme over 40 years. It aims to answer two sets of research questions: (1) What types of transnational networks have been established among ECOCs? How do they operate? What functions do they have, and what are their impacts and limitations? (2) How do these transnational networks reflect the multilayered nature of European governance and the dynamics of Europeanization? Through this article, ECOC research can have a closer relationship with recent innovations in disciplines that are studying the EU's political and societal processes.

Introduction

Culture has become an increasingly significant focus of the European Union's (EU's) policy over the last two decades. Along with the expansion of the EU's competence in the cultural field and the greater politicization of European integration (Barnett 2001), EU cultural policy should be a part of the broader discussion on how to

overcome the existential crisis and growing ‘European fatigue’ in the EU. In this context, culture is linked to a range of domestic and international priorities (Carta and Higgott 2020). The European Community’s (EC) activities in the cultural sphere only started developing in the 1970s, when collaborations, imitations and conflicts with other international and transnational platforms began to define the trajectory of the Community. Cultural activity in the EC gained significant momentum in the early 1980s. The EU Solemn Declaration of 1983 included a long list of actions to strengthen cultural cooperation. Culture ministers from the EC began to meet regularly, culminating a few months after the Stuttgart Declaration in a joint decision to launch the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) (Patel and Calligaro 2019).

Established in 1985, the ECOC is at the core of the EU’s cultural action and one of the most visible manifestations of the EU policy’s dual focus on cultural and transnational spaces (Patel 2013a). Europe can be viewed as a transnational space whose underlying concept is to promote the richness and diversity of European cultures while demonstrating common European values at the grassroots (Griffiths 2006; Lähdesmäki 2012; Tölle 2016). However, despite growing research interest in the ECOC, existing literature tends to ignore or marginalize any link between the ECOC and EU’s cultural policy. The ECOC has become an important vehicle for the EU to promote transnational cooperation in line with the EU’s policy objectives of promoting balanced spatial development and territorial cohesion (Herrschel and Newman 2017; Németh 2017). Previous, current, future, and even candidate ECOCs are continuing to build more networks, exchanges, meetings, and joint projects (Sassatelli 2013). Recently, the emphasis on the European dimension of the ECOC can be considered a sign that the programme is strengthening Europeanization and possesses a transnational reach (Aiello and Thurlow 2006).

Due to the nature of EU governance, transnational networks are gaining greater traction in Europe. Unlike nation-states, the EU operates in a networked environment wherein participants at different levels (regional, national, and European) proceed through negotiations. Emerging from the ‘transnationalism’ movement, transnational networks are generally defined as the numerous and increasing connections among people or institutions across nation-state borders (Kaiser and Starie 2005). Transnational networks are often described as tools for horizontal Europeanization, promoting learning and disseminating best practices. Horizontal mobilization is correlated with vertical action and serves to advance interests against upper-level governments (Guderjan 2013). Cities in Europe are becoming more involved in transnational organizations and networks. Building transnational ties has become integral to city development strategies, as there is a clear correlation between the degree to which cities are integrated into transnational networks and urban development in a globalized world, especially for ‘latecomer’ cities in Central and Eastern Europe that are eager to overcome marginalization (Tölle 2016). However, whether theoretically or practically, the transnational networks among ECOC host cities have not received much attention from academia.

This study aims to answer the following two sets of research questions: (1) What types of transnational networks have been established among ECOCs? How do they

operate? What functions do they have, and what are their impacts and limitations? (2) How do these transnational networks reflect the multilayered nature of European governance and the dynamics of Europeanization? In the following sections, we will first present basic concepts about EU governance, transnational networks, and transnational municipal networks and then introduce the applied methodology. Next, we will examine the three major functions of transnational networks among ECOCs over the past 40 years.

Literature Review

EU Governance and Transnational Networks

The emergence of transnational networks reflects the multilayered nature of European governance and dynamics of Europeanization (Kern and Bulkeley 2009). Over the past 20 years, European integration has led to mobilization at the sub-national level and the creation of a new mode of interaction between the EU and local levels called multi-level governance (MLG) (Bache *et al.* 2011; Guderjan 2013). In the EU MLG landscape, power is not only shifted upwards but also shared at multiple levels between public and private actors, thereby blurring the boundaries between different political spheres (Rosamond 2007) as in transnational networks. Meanwhile, Europeanization generally refers to adaptations and changes occurring within local governments or European institutions. The debate on Europeanization provides insight into the means of achieving MLG (Pollack 2005) and thus complements the analysis of European multilayered systems. Supranational bodies, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, have long encouraged the formation of transnational networks. This is clearly reflected in the 2001 EU White Paper on European Governance (European Commission 2001). To address the challenge of democratic deficit, the Commission's strategy is a more-than-transparent inclusion of transnationally composed non-state actors in the network-based consultation process. The enlarged EU with its increased heterogeneity and cultural diversity also provides more opportunities for the formation and influence of transnational networks (Kaiser 2010).

Policy network is a meaningful concept used to analyse the process of European transnationalization and provide an important basis for debating, developing and implementing policies in the evolving supranational organizations and under the complex MLG structure (Goggin 2009; Heard-Lauréote 2005). Policy networks encompass different state and non-state actors with common interests that negotiate and execute policies in specific policy areas (Kaiser 2009a). Kohler-Koch (2002) points out two core features of policy networks: (1) decision-making power is dispersed among politically equal participants, and (2) this decentralized relationship provides opportunities for negotiation in decision-making. Initially, the quality of policy networks was believed to improve through expert input, thereby helping to achieve 'output legitimacy'. More recently, however, the European Commission hopes to strengthen 'input legitimacy' through more participation by civil society in

policymaking (Kaiser 2009b). Thus, transnational networks with their civic characteristics are not only useful venues for the EU to test its policies and facilitate the exchange of best practices and other experiences among cities but also to reach key decision makers and resources, lobby EU institutions and internalize new norms or modes of governance (Giest and Howlett 2013; Guderjan and Verhelst 2021).

Transnational municipal networks in Europe

The aforementioned EU governance features provide an environment in which cities can compete for influence as well as build networks and partnerships (Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Payre 2010). Transnational municipal networks (TMNs), characterized as voluntary, decentralized and non-hierarchical cooperation, are multilateral associations of cities pursuing specific policy agendas (Guderjan and Verhelst 2021; Kern and Bulkeley 2009). While the EU regards networks as ways to bring European policies closer to the people, cities may equally see networks as opportunities to create a stronger mandate to represent local interests and subvert national centralization (Bulkeley *et al.* 2003). TMNs directly link cities, thereby facilitating information exchange, collective action and policy coordination among their members in a transnational manner (Niederhafner 2013). The European Commission has encouraged TMNs to coordinate their activities as a means of implementing the former's policy priorities (Bulkeley *et al.* 2003; Bulkeley 2004; Benington and Harvey 1999). From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the TMN became one of the key elements of the EU's mainstream policies. Since then, the EU has actively promoted TMNs as channels to develop and deliver innovative policies at the local level (Benington and Harvey 1999).

With the introduction of regional policy, the European Commission has encouraged the creation of TMNs as a way of reducing social and economic disparities within the EU and promoting local preferences and practices (Kern and Bulkeley 2009). The most influential culturally-related transnational networks include the European Year of Architectural Heritage (EAHY), the Eurocities Culture Forum, LIKE, the European Creative Hubs Network funded by the European Council, the Intercultural Cities programme from the Council of Europe, etc. Initiated by the European Commission, the EAHY was one of the first examples of EC policy introduction as motivated by transnational networks (Patel and Calligaro 2019). Consisting of about 150 cities from more than 30 countries, Eurocities was founded in 1986 to form a network of local governments that incorporate large cities in European countries (Baycan-Levent *et al.* 2010). LIKE, which was formerly known as Les Rencontres, is a European network of cities and regions connected through cultural issues. It was founded in 1994 and has more than 100 members. The LIKE network focuses on cultural policy and provides a unique environment for local authorities and cultural institutions to collaborate and debate. The Intercultural Cities programme comprises over 90 cities from Europe and beyond, supporting the cities' policies and intercultural strategies.

Methodology

Research Methods

Methodologically, this study is based on ‘qualitative meta-analysis’ (Timulak 2009), a method of rigorous secondary qualitative analysis of primary findings that offers a more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon. As a meta-assessment of the ECOC, the validity of this study relies on retaining a comprehensive perspective and ensuring that the experience of the overall ECOC programme is seen as broadly as possible. Given the available resources and time, the focus is not on generating new evidence, but on leveraging existing evidence and highlighting the most obvious trends within the materials at hand. The analysis also attempts to strike a balance between macro- (comparative assessments) and micro- (specialized ECOC reports and academic case studies) analyses. With respect to data sources, after nearly 40 years of development, the EU, local authorities and academia have produced many specialized documents related to the ECOC programme. Especially since 2004, more commissioned and independent academic evaluation reports are being published at an accelerating rate. This study has collected a large volume of archival documents from EU institutions and research units, aiming to define, compare and validate relevant findings generated through these broad and diverse texts.

The materials adopted in this study include EU policy documents on the ECOC programme, evaluation reports of previous ECOCs, application files (bid books) of forthcoming or candidate ECOCs, academic case studies, etc. In terms of evaluation reports, professional research institutions and scholars have been conducting comprehensive evaluation of the ECOC every 10 years on behalf of the European Commission, and these evaluations provide an important basis for defining the context of the initiative’s transnationalization. The first study was Myerscough’s (1994) report on the ECOCs from 1985 to 1994. The second report, produced by Palmer/Rae (2004), covered the ECOCs from 1995 to 2004. Following the Palmer/Rae (2004) report, the same group of experts and scholars published five subsequent ECOC Reports in 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2015, supported by the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS). The last comprehensive assessment was conducted by García and Cox (2013), who examined the long-term impact of the ECOC programme over three decades and explored successful strategies and best practices. Additionally, from 2007 to 2019, the European Commission authorized Ecorys, a British professional consultancy, to conduct yearly impact assessments for each ECOC host city.

To enhance the originality of the current study, primary sources were also collected to supplement the above secondary documents. As this study focuses specifically on the perspectives of practitioners involved in the ECOC’s networks, purposive sampling was adopted for the sample group of interviewees; in early 2023, online interviews were conducted with five informants from the following key networks. A limitation of this study is that the interviewees’ professional backgrounds may suggest a vested interest in conveying the success of the ECOC’s networks, thus leading to some bias.

- General Secretary, University Network of the ECOCs (UNeECC)
- Project Leader, ECOC Policy network
- Project Coordinator, Culture Next
- Project Manager, ECOCs and Cross-border Urban Cohesion (CECCUT)
- Research Fellow, ECOC and CCEA Partnership

Analytical Framework

To answer the two research question sets, the analytical framework of this study refers to past research on the functions of transnational networks and the types of Europeanization. Transnational networks are functionally varied. Scholars, such as Kaiser (2009c), Heard-Lauréote (2005) and Guderjan and Verhelst (2021) have identified six core functions of transnational networks that have important direct and indirect repercussions for European integration policymaking: (1) the exchange and transfer of ideas, experiences or best practices below the supranational level; (2) the creation of transnational social capital, such as the pooling of resources to enhance individual capacity; (3) the development of common policy objectives or innovative solutions for joint policy challenges; (4) the socialization of actors into existing behavioural patterns, policy norms and styles; (5) the identification of suitable transnational partners for implementing European policy objectives; and (6) the influence on European policymaking to alleviate the democratic deficit of EU governance.

The author used the above categories to identify what TMNs set out to do and what they actually achieve. The dynamics of Europeanization can be observed in three dimensions: (1) top-down vertical Europeanization, i.e., the influence of EU laws and financial instruments on local authorities; (2) bottom-up vertical Europeanization, i.e., the influence of local authorities on EU decision-making; and (3) horizontal Europeanization, i.e., various forms of cooperation among local authorities within the European framework (Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Van Bever *et al.* 2011). The three dimensions help to categorize the operations of TMNs.

Research Findings

Knowledge Transfer

Policy networks provide an opportunity for sharing knowledge and transferring best practices horizontally among local governments. Ideas are diffused through different networks in Europe such as for improving ECOC management (Lamour and Durand 2019). In this context, political power is exercised through the creation of networks to gather and distribute resources. Informal communication and networking are common ways of exchanging ideas, sharing experiences and transferring knowledge during the development of the ECOC programme. Since the 1990s, various informal networks have been instrumental in advancing formal exchanges

among ECOCs. The European Commission also continues to encourage cooperation among past, present and future ECOC cities. In 1990, Glasgow, Athens, West Berlin and other cities that had hosted the ECOC established a network called the Network of European Cultural Cities and Months (ECCM) to promote and expand cooperation among member cities. Members of the network, both former and upcoming cities, met in a conference format to exchange information and professional experiences. The European Commission encouraged this initiative by maintaining contact with the group and providing financial support for the meetings (Cogliandro 2001; Myerscough 1994). In 2004, a survey was launched to solicit proposals about the transferring of knowledge and best practices among ECOC cities. The survey revealed that although the main goal of the ECCM network was to share information between past and future ECOCs, unfortunately only a few past ECOC directors remain current members. In addition, exchange of experiences mainly relied on informal discussions with certain experienced individuals rather than through official ECCM network meetings (Palmer/Rae 2004). Even so, there was a consensus to maintain the ECCM network among respondents due to a lack of any central guiding mechanism within the ECOC programme at that time.

The institutional context following the Maastricht Treaty provided new opportunities for actors from regional, local, private and third sectors to participate in the EU's cultural actions. The ECOC has become one of EU's main cultural initiatives. One hallmark of ECOC institutionalization has been the creation of the University Network of the ECOCs (UNeECC) in 2006 (Sassatelli 2013). This network now aims to bring universities into ECOC activities while creating 'town and gown' synergy and cross-fertilization between the ECOC programme and academia (Carriijn 2019). UNeECC has developed rapidly from an initial group of 15 members, which reflects a growing interest in ECOC research (Palmer *et al.* 2011). The university network provides a platform for experience sharing and collaboration among its member institutions, particularly academics involved in ECOC research and professionals from local cultural and administrative authorities involved in organizing the ECOC (Interview 1). Therefore, UNeECC helps to identify ECOC best practices and establish links with civil society. Through its annual conference, UNeECC provides an interdisciplinary platform for scholars from Europe and beyond. From 2007 to 2019, some conference themes followed the priorities for the year as proposed by the European Commission (e.g., 2009 Vilnius and 2010 Pécs), while other themes were influenced by the specific interests of the organizing university (e.g., 2016 Wrocław and 2018 Valletta) or local specificities of the host cities (e.g., 2008 Liverpool and 2013 Marseille).

Moreover, in 2006, Stavanger (ECOC in 2008) established an informal network to exchange experiences with past, present and future ECOCs (Ecorys 2009). In 2013, the year before the ECOC 2014 event in Umeå, a 'family meeting' was held in Sweden and attended by 16 past, present and future ECOCs from 2008 to 2018 (Hugoson 2015). These informal ECOC networks of host city organizers and policymakers operate independently with no allocated resources, and members are free to join and leave as they please (Interview 1). Consequently, these networks

neither function as repositories of knowledge beyond the immediate needs of their members nor institutionalize the sharing of historical archives and data (Interview 2). However, these examples of TMNs do mobilize local governments and seek collective action to influence European and national policies, secure resources and enhance capacities. The actual impact of these networks on the transferring of knowledge and best practices remains unknown due to the lack of relevant impact studies. Generally, members of such networks expect some additional impact, such as gaining more support from the European Commission or strengthening the current structure without requiring a bureaucratic framework (Interviews 1 and 2).

Agenda Setting

In addition to the horizontal transferring of knowledge and practices among host cities, transnational networks feed information vertically into the European policy cycle. By setting the agenda, policy networks help realize bottom-up Europeanization and implement EU policy at the grassroots (Guderjan and Verhelst 2021). For example, the European Commission has become increasingly active in funding dedicated evaluations and pilot research frameworks for the ECOC programme (García and Cox 2013). In 1994, the ECCM network produced the first evaluation report examining ECOC experiences since the beginning of the programme (Myerscough 1994). Transnational experts, such as John Myerscough (author of the 1994 report) and Robert Palmer (representative of the network steering group) played crucial roles in analysing and improving the ECOC programme (Patel 2013b). In 2008, Liverpool's extensive Impacts 08 research programme also had a positive knock-on effect in terms of knowledge transfer. In 2010, the Commission funded the establishment of the ECOC Policy network to promote good practices, conduct research and provide evaluation recommendations to ECOC host cities.

The ECOC Policy network was built by delivery managers and research units in past, current and future ECOC cities, including Liverpool and Stavanger, 2008; Linz, 2009; Essen for Ruhr, 2010 and Kosić, 2013 (ECOC Policy Group 2013). Led by the Impacts 08 project team in Liverpool, the policy group's main work is to expand the discussion on the best framework for assessing the ECOC experience and to pilot a replicable evaluation model (Interview 2). The ECOC Policy Group published an evaluation framework with relevant themes and priority indicators to assess the impact of the ECOC programmes (Palmer *et al.* 2011). This eventually led to Decision 445/2014/EU that requires all 2020–2033 ECOCs to perform their own assessments; the European Commission (2018a) also issued new guidance based on the six suggested clusters of indicators for future ECOCs as stated in the Policy Group report.

Similarly, Culture Next is a network founded in 2017 by 10 European cities with members of current, former and candidate ECOC cities. The network's mission is to support cities in implementing culture-led urban development plans and policies as well as capacity-building focused on preparing and implementing ECOC

programmes. Through its agenda setting and lobbying, Culture Next aims to be the voice of European cultural policy in expanding the existing European framework for cultural cooperation as well as promoting cultural contributions to sustainable development within said framework (Interview 3).

Created in 2018, the European Capitals of Culture and Cross-border Urban Cohesion (CECCUT) is a network sponsored by the Erasmus+ programme. CECCUT aims to analyse the three interrelated foundations of the ECOC initiative, including a sense of belonging, social inclusion and urban development. It encourages interactions among researchers, public actors and civil society representatives as well as creates new knowledge loops to better define cross-border ECOCs. Through a series of public events, direct links have been established between experts and urban practitioners for knowledge transfer (Interview 4). In its agenda setting, this network emphasizes the driving force of cross-border cooperation in European integration and spatial cohesion. CECCUT can thus be seen as a facilitating platform for EU cross-border integration projects (Lamour and Durand 2019).

Exporting the EU Model

In recent years, the EU has been attempting to promote its international cultural strategy on the global stage. Launched in 2016, the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations and Cultural Diplomacy Platform encourages cultural cooperation between the EU and its partners. Cultivating external cultural relations is also one of the key goals of the 2018 European Cultural Agenda (Christensen-Redzepovic 2018; European Commission 2018b). This context offers an opportunity for the formation and influence of transnational networks, in particular, the potential of cities to support the EU's global strategy (Abdullah and Molho 2020). The rise of TMNs shows the crucial role of cities in the development of transnational cultural connections and their function as autonomous international policy actors. Inspired by European initiatives, other continents and regions have begun to construct their own capital/city of culture programmes, such as the American Capital of Culture, the Arab Capital of Culture, the ASEAN Capital of Culture and the Cultural Capital of East Asia (CCEA) (Ocón 2017). CCEA is a cultural cooperation initiative between Japan, South Korea and China to develop culture-led and sustainable urban development. The European Commission funded a study exploring how a strategic partnership between the CCEA and the ECOC could be part of an effective strategy to bolster the EU's external cultural relations as well as examine possibilities and challenges that may arise in establishing this partnership. An appropriate match between the ECOC and CCEA may contribute to the development of cultural professionals and institutions in artist mobility, co-creation, capacity building, transnational collaboration, etc. It can also create new networks with other sectors in the participating cities (Interview 5). This is how the ECOC title is gradually becoming a platform for exporting the EU model and creating transnational networks.

Conclusion

The value of transnational networks lies in how they clarify political exchanges, decision-making and policy transfer below the EU level as well as the dynamic policymaking process in the wider European and local context (Heard-Lauréote 2005). Previous, current, future and even candidate ECOCs are organizing more networks, exchanges and joint projects. Transnational networks directly link ECOCs, thereby facilitating collective action as well as policy coordination and transfer, or in other words, realizing a horizontal Europeanization (Guderjan and Verhelst 2021). Through this article, ECOC research can be more clearly seen within similar contexts as recent innovations in disciplines studying the EU's political and societal processes, and thus become mainstreamed in European Studies.

This article ends with an iteration of its theoretical and empirical contributions, embedding current study in the broader interdisciplinary framework of European Studies and illustrating some points for future research. Theoretically, the concepts of transnational and policy networks are hardly new in either political science or history. However, the existing literature often disregards or marginalizes the connections between the ECOC and EU policies. This research contributes to the literature in explaining the role of societal actors in shaping EU cultural policy. The networks studied promote cities as actors in EU cultural policy and provide an effective structure for knowledge-sharing and peer-learning.

This study also shows the extent to which transnational networks provide access to key decision makers and maximize opportunities within the changing power structures of the EU's MLG system. The Europeanization process indicates the opening of a new political sphere where ECOC cities can play a new multi-level role. Through agenda setting, policy networks help realize bottom-up Europeanization and implement EU policy at the grassroots. Transnational networks directly link ECOCs, thereby facilitating collective action as well as policy coordination and transfer, which in turn realize horizontal Europeanization. Meanwhile, the case of ECOC has also shown how MLG complicates the power relations between macro- and micro-level actors.

Empirically, we have summarized the achievements and challenges faced by the ECOC while establishing transnational networks. The actual achievements of the six TMNs studied are summarized in Table 1 and discussed as follows.

First, transnational networks have contributed to shaping the trajectory of the ECOC programme and to constructing a European field of cultural action. They reflect the trend toward supranationalization and the increasing involvement of civil society in the ECOC programme, driven by the fact that ECOC action has become more professional (Staiger 2013). Today, there is more collaboration between the ECOC cities and other European cultural networks than ever before (Patel 2013a). Informal communication and professional connections are essential to policy networking activities. There is growing interest now in the experience and information available in the ECOC network. Informal networks of previous and upcoming ECOC organizers are seen as focal points for gaining first-hand experience

Table 1. The actual achievements of the ECOC TMNs

TMNs	Actual achievements
ECCM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering knowledge and transferring best practices horizontally • Setting the agenda and improving the quality of the ECOC programme
UNeECC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating the sharing of experiences • Identifying best practices • Establishing links with civil society
ECOC Policy Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting good practices • Providing recommendations for the evaluation of ECOC • Reshaping assessment methods
Culture Next	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting the agenda and lobbying
CECCUT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting interactions among researchers, public actors and civil society
ECOC and CCEA Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting cities as actors in international cultural policy • Providing an effective structure for knowledge-sharing and peer-learning

(García and Cox 2013). Meetings mostly centre on the plans and evaluations of the ECOC programme, as upcoming host cities use the networks as sounding boards and advice forums to consult ‘veterans’. Such family events provide spaces with relaxed atmospheres for practitioners to meet and engage in more cooperative activities (Hugoson 2015). An example of cooperation along these lines of exchanges is the ECCM network and academic conference organized annually in one of the ECOC university cities by the UNeECCs.

In addition to the horizontal transferring of knowledge and practices, transnational networks help to realize bottom-up Europeanization through agenda setting. Transnational networks have contributed to the growing specialization of the ECOC and turned it into one of the most successful EU initiatives in cultural policy. Over the past 20 years, the professional team of experts has been continuously enlarged. The series of reports written by transnationally networked experts have been the impetus for numerous changes or reforms to the ECOC (Patel 2013b). For example, the ECCM network and the ECOC Policy Group have both made recommendations on how to improve the quality of the programme. Many of the recommendations of these transnational networks have been adopted by the European Commission and have influenced the reshaping of tendering procedures and assessment methods. This has also led to the creation of a truly academic field of ECOC study in addition to the growing number of specialists with practical credentials (Patel 2013b). For instance, Culture Next and CECCUT are academic networks that create new circuits of knowledge, support capacity building and

programme implementation of the host cities as well as (re)define future ECOCs and the EU's cultural policies. Generally, transnational networks provide access to key decision makers at the local level and maximize opportunities within the changing power structures of the EU's MLG system.

Furthermore, the match between the ECOC and CCEA may contribute to creating a new type of transnational network through the exportation of the EU model. These networks promote cities as actors in international cultural policy and provide an effective structure for knowledge-sharing and peer-learning in culture-led urban and socio-economic development, heritage preservation, intercultural dialogue, the improvement of citizen well-being, etc. This example demonstrates the benefits and value that European and Asian cities can derive from transnational networks. Overall, the major values of transnational networks could be exemplified in the above-mentioned ECOC practices, such as transferring best practices, creating transnational social capital, developing innovative policy solutions, socialization, identifying transnational partners and influencing European policymaking (Kaiser 2009c; Heard-Lauréote 2005; Guderjan and Verhelst 2021). However, these kinds of transnational networks face several challenges mainly due to their voluntary, decentralized and non-hierarchical natures.

In general, TMNs contribute to the growing specialization of the ECOC and the creation of a truly academic field of ECOC study. However, informal communication is essential to policy networking activities. Although there are merits to this informal approach, these networks face several challenges. For example, due to voluntary, decentralized and non-hierarchical natures, knowledge transfer still relies on partial and informal sharing. Furthermore, such exercises have been mostly fragmented, with no allocated resources and open-ended membership. One research limitation of this study which must be mentioned is the still undetermined actual impact by these networks on knowledge and practice transfer, and this gap needs to be addressed by relevant impact studies in the future. Moreover, this article has made clear the relationship between ECOC research and recent innovations in disciplines studying the EU's political and societal processes. The author recommends more research on ECOC to study other transnationalization processes, such as transnational cultural cooperation and the formation of transnational identity.

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