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“United in Diversity” as the European Identity?

An analysis of post-COVID European Capitals of Culture

ABSTRACT

The EU and Eurosceptic parties are both increasingly mobilising culture to foster opposite visions of identity. Today, the EU institutions describe identity as a space to celebrate the interconnectedness of European cultures and a framework for dialogue and comprehension between European diversities. But how do Europeans understand this institutional characterisation of European identity? It is essential to investigate how European identity is interpreted and communicated at the bottom-up level to counteract the further rise of exclusionary discourses.

The study investigates the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) understanding of the EU institutions' concept of European identity. Specifically, it asks whether one of the elements of European identity characterisation (interconnectedness or dialogue between European diversities) prevails in ECoCs' communications, and whether the EU should privilege one over the other. Evolving alongside the EU institutions' identity narrative and EU challenges, the recent increasing emphasis on the "European dimension" and digital outreach makes the programme particularly fit to investigate Europeans' understanding of European identity.

Drawing on Thomas Risse's Constructivist Theory, which conceptualises identities as socially and discursively constructed, the study employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis to examine the bid books and websites of selected post-COVID ECoCs: Eleusis, Kaunas, Veszprém-Balaton, and Esch-sur-Alzette. The analysis focuses on the two core elements of the EU's identity narrative: European interconnectedness (*Unity*) and dialogue among European diversities (*Diversity*). This coding framework is subdivided into how these elements are described, the audience addressed, and the territoriality used.

Findings reveal that the selected ECoCs communicate both Unity and Diversity without privileging one over the other and use the ECoC programme as a space to foster new European interconnectedness. However, they face challenges in representing Europe as one entity. The results suggest that EU institutions should continue to uphold a balanced narrative of European identity, avoiding the privileging of either Unity or Diversity.

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LIST of ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATION	DESCRIPTION
BB	Bid Book
EC	European Commission
ECoC	European Capital of Culture
ECoCs	European Capitals of Culture: more than one city selected for the title
EP	European Parliament
MMDA	Multimodal Discourse Analysis
MS	Member State
WS	Website

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the EU has increasingly relied on cultural policies to foster a sense of belonging among its citizens. Both local and national identities are built on culture and heritage, and the EU is increasingly mirroring this practice. Central to this effort is the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) programme, a flagship initiative that promotes cultural exchange and cohesion. Originally launched in 1983 as "European Cities of Culture" and evolving under various strategic agendas, the ECoC programme is the longest-lasting EU cultural policy and follows the EU "United in diversity" narrative. Article 5 of Decision No. 445/2014/EU sets six criteria for the ECoCs to follow: Contribution to the long-term strategy, European dimension, Cultural and artistic content, Capacity to deliver, Outreach, and Management (EP and Council, 2021).

In recent years, the European Commission (EC) has placed growing emphasis on the "European dimension," urging cities to articulate their contribution to European identity. The cities are required to foster Europe's diversity, intercultural dialogue and European mutual understanding; emphasise common aspects of European cultures, heritage, history and current themes; engage European artists and transnational partnerships; and attract a wide European and international audience (EC, 2023:8). Due to its aim, its longevity and its wide reach, the ECoC programme is a useful policy to investigate the EU institution's characterisation of European identity and the Member States' (MS) reception and portrayal of it.

Nowadays, following a long evolution, two elements, reflecting the "United in diversity" motto, constitute the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity. European identity is a space to celebrate the interconnectedness of European cultures and a framework for dialogue and understanding between European diversities.

In light of the above, this research aims to answer the question: How do the post-COVID European Capitals of Culture understand and communicate the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity? The manner in which a long-term cultural initiative such as the ECoC programme conceives of European identity is fundamental to understanding how the EU should articulate that identity and to determining the most appropriate approach to fostering or consolidating a European identity. Furthermore, the focus on post-COVID cities is motivated by the current literature gap of cross-comparative studies on the perception of European identity after 2021, the substantial impact of the pandemic on relations among MSs, and the increasing reliance on digital outreach over the past decade.

A supranational cross-comparative analysis of online materials, namely websites (WSs) and bid books (BBs), from four post-COVID ECoCs will be conducted to answer the research question. The ECoCs selected, namely Eleusis, Kaunas, Veszprém-Balaton, and Esch-sur-Alzette, represent different EU macro-regions, allowing generalisation on how European identity characterisation is received. More precisely, the research question can be subdivided into the following points:

- How do the EU institutions narrate European identity?
- Does one element (European interconnectedness or dialogue between European diversities) of the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity prevail in ECoCs' communications?
- Should the EU institutions foster one of the two elements?
- Is promoting only one element counterproductive?

Two gaps in existing literature will be addressed by analysing post-COVID examples and their online materials. Available scholarship has predominantly examined European identity in pre-pandemic ECoCs, often focusing only on the audience who participated physically in the events, while largely neglecting those who engaged with the programme online.

Examining the EU institutions and the European cities' understanding and implementation of European identity is essential to prevent the further rise of exclusionary discourses and the exploitation of the close relationship between culture, identity and emotions. In the past decade, rising nationalism and Euroscepticism have attempted to shield national identities from European integration and immigration. Additionally, the expansion and consolidation of international relations created a new cleavage between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation (Emanuele et at, 2020). Culturally, immigration and integration threaten those who deeply identify with their local area or nation (Langsæther and Stubager, 2019).

The next chapter of this study will address the methodology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA), the data selection and coding process. The third chapter will explain the changes in the institutional European identity discourse and its evolving links with culture to comprehend the current characterisation of European identity. The fourth chapter will focus on Thomas Risse's Constructivist Theory to ground the study in theoretical reasoning and support the claim that external forces, such as the EU narratives, can influence identity formation. This analysis conceptualises identities as socially and discursively constructed phenomena, subject to potential influence by institutions. The fifth chapter will focus on the analysis of the four ECoCs'

BBs and WSs, applying the codes outlined in the methodology chapter to the multiple communication modes employed. Last, findings and conclusions will be explained.

2. METHODOLOGY: How do post-COVID ECoCs understand and communicate European identity?

After having highlighted the general setting of this study, this chapter explains the methodology followed to answer the research question. This analysis aims to conduct a supranational, cross-comparative study to determine whether the EU institutions should foster European identity primarily as a framework for dialogue among diversities or as a platform to celebrate cultural intersections, by examining how European identity is articulated within the ECoC programme. Accordingly, a selection of post-COVID ECoCs is analysed to assess how they received the most recent European identity characterisation and whether they tend to privilege one side over the other (cultural interconnectedness or dialogue among diversities).

2.1 Case Selection: post-COVID ECoCs from different parts of the EU

The focus on post-COVID ECoCs is motivated by the current lack of cross-comparative studies on the perception of European identity after 2021, the significant impact of the pandemic on MSs' relations and the growing reliance on digital outreach, meaning a wider audience, over the past decade (Basaraba, 2022; Nicoli et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the selection of case studies mirrors the division of the EU into four macro-regions (Southern, Northern, Eastern, and Western) employed by Nicole Basaraba's 2022 study. In cases where multiple cities were available within the same macro-region, the one with the most complete website (WS) and the most useful English material was selected. Therefore, the analysis will focus on the following cases:

City	Country	Year	Macro-region	Website
Eleusis	Greece	2023	Southern	https://2023eleusis.eu/en/
Kaunas	Lithuania	2022	Northen	https://kaunas2022.eu/en/
Veszprém-Balaton	Hungary	2023	Eastern	https://veszprembalaton2023.hu/en
Esch-sur-Alzette	Luxembourg	2022	Western	https://esch2022.lu/en/#home

Table 1: Selected ECoCs.

These case studies are comparable in that all cities prepared and held the title year during the same period, and each followed a standardised BB structure and responded to the same selection criteria. However, understanding the EU as Anderson's imagined community, the wide range of locations, historical contexts and themes contributes to a comprehensive analysis of how

European identity is understood and represented, thereby enabling the potential for generalisation (Risse, 2005).

2.2 Data Sources: ECoCs digital communications

Two data sources were consulted to gather information on how the four ECoCs communicated their understanding of European identity: the final bid books (BBs) (100-page applications describing the cities' plans for the ECoC year) and the official WS set up by each city.

With the BBs, each city communicates their plans to the EU institutions. It has 51 questions and is divided into sections. Of these sections, the analysis will focus on the affective ones (Introduction and General Considerations, Contribution to the Long-Term Strategy, European Dimension, Cultural and Artistic Content, the Management subsection Marketing and Communication, and Additional Information), excluding: Capacity To Deliver, Outreach, the Management subsections Finance, Organisational Structure and Contingency Planning. These latter categories were excluded on the grounds that they were understood as purely practical and therefore not as carriers of identity narratives.

The WSs function as a primary orienting space for the audience (Pauwels, 2012). Because the WSs maintained their role after the end of the programme year, updating on the ECoCs legacy, the "Way Back Machine" of the "Internet Archive" was used to retrieve the WSs' version available during the ECoCs years. The WSs' version analysed corresponds to the earliest available in January of the year following the event year: specifically, 2nd and 13th January 2023 for Eleusis and Kaunas, 1st and 20th January 2024 for Veszprém and Esch-sur-Alzette.

The analysis of BBs and WSs is instrumental in assessing whether, and which aspects of European identity, the cities emphasise. The study did not consider the impact of the programme on the audience's perception of European identity because it focuses not on those who physically attended the events but on those who might have interacted with the ECoCs' communications. Moreover, such an impact assessment would be premature given that the ECoC legacy is still unfolding and the ECoCs' communications continue to evolve.

2.3 Multimodal Discourse Analysis for Bid Books and Websites

Both the analysis of the BBs and the WSs will employ a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) to capture the full range of communicative modes used by the ECoCs in expressing their vision of European identity (Kress and Bezemer, 2023). Both the BBs and the WSs are multimodal: they use multiple modes of communication (text, images, colours, videos, navigation and more) to create meaning.

WSs are rich, multimodal cultural artefacts with a complex interplay of visual, textual, and interactive elements which need to be analysed together to understand the meanings conveyed (Pauwels, 2012). Similarly, BBs are multimodal because they associate colours, layouts, images and fonts with words (Kress and Bezemer, 2023).

MMDA focuses on how different modes are used to express a certain discourse, such as the one around European identity. It studies how these modes collaborate in specific situations to create meaning in texts, understood as any communicative method, such as the ECoCs WSs and BBs (Jones, 2012). Thus, MMDA will be used to study how ECoCs use a combination of language and visuals to create and express their understanding of European identity and the possible leaning toward one element or the other. This approach acknowledges that language is just one of several means for meaning-making, and focusing solely on it would capture only partial meanings (Iedema, 2003). Consequently, using multimodal data sources, the full message of ECoCs can emerge only from the combined contributions of all the modes.

Therefore, MMDA is a valuable approach to analyse how ECoCs portray European identity because, first, it recognises that all used modes carry explicit meaning. Second, it gives importance to the role of agency in communications, highlighting the necessity of analysing who is speaking in the ECoCs' communications. Third, MMDA acknowledges that each mode has distinct affordances and logic, which affect not only the way ECoCs communicate (the ontology of communication), but also the kind of knowledge ECoCs produce and how they conceptualise European identity in their contexts (the epistemology of communication) (Kress and Bezemer, 2023).

2.4 Coding Process: Unity vs. Diversity

To identify which aspect of European identity ECoCs communicate, the analysis focused on the two elements described by the EU institutions as constitutive of European identity: cultural interconnectedness (*Unity*) and dialogue among diversities (*Diversity*). To capture the multifaceted nature of these two dimensions, each was subdivided into three analytical categories: *territory*, *discourse* and *audience*. This coding framework (Figure 1) is based on the six criteria for the ECoCs programme set out in Article 5 of Decision No. 445/2014/EU, namely Contribution to the long-term strategy, European dimension, Cultural and artistic content, Capacity to deliver, Outreach, and Management (EP and Council, 2021) and was developed using NVivo software to ensure a more systematic and precise analysis.

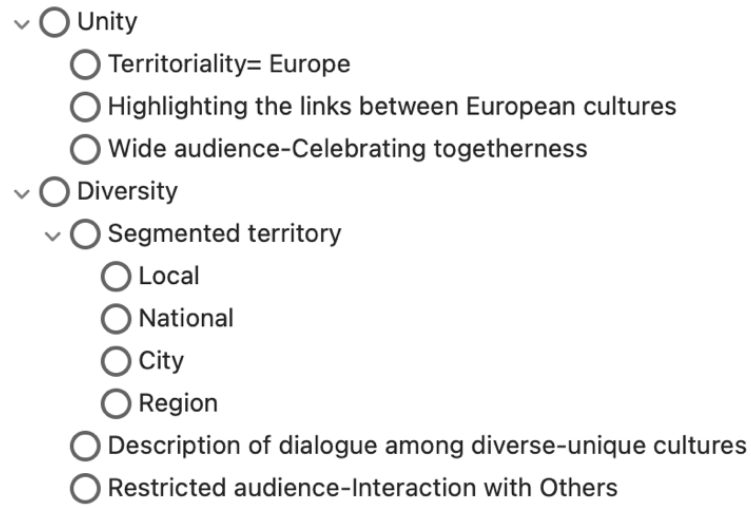


Figure 1: NVivo codes and subcategories.

The BBs were analysed using NVivo software. While the same NVivo coding framework was used for the website analysis, the actual examination of the content was conducted independently of the software.

Having outlined the methodology for this study, the next chapter offers an excursus on European narratives concerning European identity and the role of culture in identity formation. The analysis of identity discourse begins with the initial stages of the European project and extends to the most recent developments. This overview aims to trace the evolution leading to the latest characterisation of European identity, which is the focus of this study.

3. An OVERVIEW of EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Before examining how post-COVID ECoCs now depict European identity in their online communications, it is essential to understand the EU's own conception of identity and how its official narrative has evolved over time. The focus and rhetoric of the ECoC initiative have evolved in tandem with shifts in EU cultural policy, political objectives, and broader institutional discourse. Thus, having a historical overview is necessary to understand the most recent portrayal of identity.

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the evolving concept of European identity as articulated by European institutions from the beginning of the European project to the present day. By tracing the historical and political shifts in how European identity has been officially described and promoted, the chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the contemporary narratives employed by the ECoC in the post-COVID era.

This review is divided into four chronological sections, each examining a change in the characterisation of European identity. The chapter begins with the 1950s, when the focus was on economic integration. The founding treaties and theories of functionalism and neo-functionalism largely sidelined cultural and identity concerns. Identity was neglected or considered a secondary, eventual outcome of economic cooperation, with legitimacy sparking from elite consensus rather than popular belonging. The 1970s marked a shift: economic and political challenges exposed the limitations of an integration based solely on economic grounds, leading to the first official articulations of European identity and the creation of cultural initiatives, such as the European City of Culture Program. During this period, identity was constructed around a common high cultural heritage to foster a sense of unity and address the democratic deficit. In the 1990s, the Maastricht Treaty brought a new transformation by establishing the EU citizenship, the legal bases for European cultural policy, and fostering a common European heritage, acknowledging the importance of national and regional diversity. This period saw a move away from an elitist, homogenising vision toward a more inclusive and decentralised approach. In the 2000s, the concept of European identity continued to evolve in response to enlargement, globalisation, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The EU adopted the motto "United in diversity" and increasingly emphasised intercultural dialogue and the need to address both the opportunities and anxieties brought by diversity and mobility. Initiatives, such as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008 and the adaptation of the ECoC program, reflected the new understanding of identity. The EU institutions began to characterise European identity as a space for dialogue between different cultures and the promotion of European communalities. To conclude, the chapter underlynes that the 2025 Cultural Compass and the Special Eurobarometer

562 pointed to culture as the unifying core of a European identity framed as a shared space where diversity is celebrated, while common values and heritage foster cohesion and belonging.

This historical overview provides the necessary context for analysing how contemporary ECoCs interpret and communicate European identity, as it uncovers the institutional narratives and policy shifts that continue to shape how "Europeanness" is constructed and expressed. The ECoCs do not interpret European identity in a vacuum. Rather, they respond to, reinterpret, and sometimes challenge the official EU narrative. By situating the analysis of ECoC communications within the broader historical and theoretical context of European identity construction, this chapter ensures that the subsequent examination is critically informed and sensitive to the complexities and contestations that have shaped the idea of "united in diversity." In doing so, it provides the necessary bases for analysing how post-COVID ECoCs negotiate, adapt, and communicate the concept of European identity on their digital platforms.

Over time, what has European identity meant for European institutions?

3.1 1950s: Economic integration

In this section, the initial European project's rejection of culture and identity is discussed. The focus is on the Treaty of Rome, David Mitrany's functionalist theory, and Ernst B. Haas's neo-functionalist approach to understand the various ways culture and identity were approached.

In its first years, the European project founders did not consider it necessary to enforce a common identity. In the 1950s, the focus was on maintaining peace through economic collaboration, aiming to avoid the competition for strategic resources that had led to instability in the past (Guibernau, 2011). To achieve solid peace, complete national sovereignty and nationalism had to give way to cooperation between nations. However, conscious that nationalism was too strong to be eliminated, the EU fathers focused on mitigating it through economic integration (ibid.). Integration was set to be quite slow to avoid the hostility of the post-war European populations toward a new political union.

From a different perspective, Vanke (2007), analysing the Treaty of Rome, argues that the European project always had a certain degree of interest in forming a common sense of belonging among its populations and requested a sense of solidarity, trust, and shared purpose among the MS. The first lines of the Treaty of Rome recite: "*DETERMINED to establish the bases for an ever closer union between the European populations*"[1] (European Parliamentary Assembly, 1957:11).

[1] The text cites my translation from the Italian version of the Treaty of Rome.

Overall, the Treaty of Rome and the initial actions of the European Community make it clear that the primary focus of the project was economic integration. The issue of identity, meanwhile, was either largely neglected or seen as a likely positive but secondary outcome of the initiative. In support of the first stance, Mitrany's functionalism advised that European integration avoided all at once cultural and identity discourses, and instead, focused on functional and technical collaboration, which was understood as sufficient for nurturing the support of the states involved (Jarvis, 1994). Thus, identity discourses had to be avoided as irrelevant or even compromising.

From another perspective, Haas's neo-functionalism theorised the "spill-over effect." Integration in one sector would have likely led to integration in another (ibid.). In this discourse, the establishment of a European identity was seen as a possible and probable effect of economic integration. The focus on economic integration would have brought political integration, and only in the latest stages, cultural integration (Sassatelli, 2008). Therefore, neo-functionalism understood European identity as something marginal that would have likely been realised by itself, but was not among the main interests of the institutions.

Regarding Haas's evaluation of how successful European integration could be, he stated "*It suffices to single out and define the political elites in the participating countries, to study their reactions to integration and to assess changes in attitude on their part.*" (Haas, 1958:17). The success of the European project was determined by the elite's commitment to peaceful collaboration. Because of the presumed lack of interest of the population in European politics, the citizens' permissive support for the integration and the bureaucratic nature of the European project, the elites' opinion was what mattered and a shared European feeling of belonging had no role (yet) in the success of European integration (Kuhn, 2019).

For the first two decades of European integration, the focus was on peaceful coexistence through economic integration, and there was no interest in promoting a common identity. As the next section will illustrate, the politicisation of the European project by national politics led to a shift from the early decades' "permissive consensus" to a "constraining dissensus," which required the fostering of a shared feeling of belonging.

3.2 1970s and 80s: Identity as High Cultural Heritage

During the first two decades of European integration, as articulated through the functionalist narrative, the European project derived its legitimacy from the promise of economic prosperity and stability rather than democratic legitimacy. However, the 1970s economic crisis,

along with the internal challenges posed by the first enlargement, weakened this legitimacy and led to a notable decline in public support for integration. To further deepen the political integration, it became essential to identify new justifications for European unity that extended beyond mere economic growth (Calligaro, 2014). The Copenhagen Declaration of European Identity, the 1974 European Parliament resolution, the Tindemans Report and the Solemn Declaration sparked the debates about a common European identity. This dialogue was put into practice by the European Historical Sites and Monuments Fund and the European City of Culture Program.

The need for an escape goat for the economic crisis and the inherently political question of enlargement led to the politicisation of European integration by national politics. This politicisation exposed the European project's democratic deficit and marked a shift from permissive consensus to a 'constraining dissensus' in the relationship between the public and the European institutions (Statham and Trenz, 2014). Schmitter (1969) explains politicisation as the process by which joint decision-making becomes increasingly contentious as more matters are incorporated, in this case, in national politics, and more people are engaged, thereby influencing the extent and depth of political integration. As the World Wars increased people's requests to participate in national politics, the enlargement and the economic crisis clarified the impact of the European Communities' policies on the public, who started to demand more involvement. During the World Wars, homelands transformed into 'noospheres,' not merely physical locations but territories permeated with memories and emotions connected to the mass' identity. As a result, by the end of the Wars, people sought representation (Graham, Parker and Dayton, 2011). Similarly, once the European public became aware of the extent to which European policies influenced their daily lives, national political agendas started to incorporate European integration, compelling European policymakers to confront the issue of the European democratic deficit. (Statham and Trenz, 2014).

Consequently, in an effort to strengthen democratic legitimacy, European policymakers began to recognise the significance of fostering a European identity and implemented policies aimed at engaging more directly with their public (Kuhn, 2019; Sassatelli, 2002). However, this can hardly derive from a strictly financial and economic union. Instead, cultural policies spark emotions and speak directly to people's identity. Emotions create awareness that can be used in contrasting ways: enhancing nationalism or expanding European integration (Wodak, 2020). Thus, the European Communities increased their focus on cultural policies that could encourage emotions of belonging toward the institutions.

The very first step toward a European project centred on its citizens was the 1973 Declaration of European Identity. At the Copenhagen European Summit, the Heads of State or Government from the nine Member States of the expanded European Communities declared their commitment to incorporating the concept of European identity into their collective foreign relations (CVCE, 2013).

Following the Declaration, the European Parliament (EP)'s resolution of 1974 "*on the motion for a resolution submitted on behalf of the Liberal and Allies Group on measures to protect the European cultural heritage*" (European Parliament, 1974b), clearly links European identity with the protection of cultural heritage. In the introductory discussion, Lady Elles concludes her proposal by stating: "*In view of the intention expressed of the Heads of State or government in the Declaration of Copenhagen in December 1973 to create a European identity, there can be no firmer foundation than the wealth that transcends all political parties, all national frontiers and all centuries, a cultural heritage which brings a deeper value and meaning to our daily lives beyond the economic, financial and material considerations which so beset us*." (European Parliament, 1974a:9). These words undoubtedly base European identity on the preservation of a common European cultural heritage and, with it, the conservation of its spiritual and symbolic significance (Calligaro, 2014).

A year later, the Tindemans Report of 1975 promoted a "Citizens' Europe" built on mobility, recognition of qualifications and cultural and educational exchange. The report advocated for the creation of a European identity based on European citizenship, complementing the national one (Tindemans, 1976; Ruchet, 2011). Furthermore, the Solemn Declaration of 1983 used the words "European identity" for the first time and wished for "[…] *an ever-closer union among the peoples and Member States of the European Community.*" (European Council, 1983:25). These documents pushed for a collective, united European identity based on commonalities that largely overshadowed the differences between MS.

These commonalities were identified as shared values exemplified by a common "high" cultural heritage, as highlighted by the creation in 1984 of the European Historical Sites and Monuments Fund and, in 1985, of the European City of Culture Program. The fund mainly supported Christian, Ancient Greek and Roman buildings and sites (Calligaro, 2014). Within this rhetoric, Athens became the first European City of Culture. The opening ceremony was held on the Acropolis, the symbol of democracy, where European political leaders repeatedly portrayed the EU as the rightful heir to Greek heritage. This rhetoric continued the next year with the nomination of Florence, honoured as the birthplace of values that founded the European project,

such as Humanism, civil liberties, and mercantile capitalism (ibid.). And, perpetuated until 1990, seeing a string of cities already capitals of culture by their very nature (Immler and Sakkers, 2014).

The European City of Culture Program, predecessor of the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) program, started as an intergovernmental initiative developed by the European Communities' Cultural Ministers. In 1883, its promoter, the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, stated: "*It is time for our* [the Culture Ministers'] *voice to be heard as loud as that of the technocrats. Culture, art and creativity are not less important than technology, commerce and the economy*" (Sassatelli, 2008) and the program was estabilished as an annual event designed "*to help bring the peoples of the Member States closer together*" (Garcia and Cox, 2013). The program first presented itself not just as a festival, but as a platform for exchange, debate, and reflection, with a dual purpose: to highlight the city's culture across Europe and to expose the seed elements of Europe's identity. In its initial years, it celebrated traditional, high culture and focused on culturally known cities to materialise the characteristics of the European identity (Immler and Sakkers, 2014). In the 1990s, this high culture-centred approach to European identity was criticised as elitist and homogenising, and respect for diversity began to be acknowledged.

3.3 1990s: Widening of the Culture that Shaped Identity

The 1990s truly gave voice to the protests against the homogenisation of culture by widening the cultural base for European identity. The Maastricht Treaty established the legal base for EU citizenship and cultural policy, marking a turning point in the characterisation of what is European identity. Moreover, the decentralisation of culture was supported by the EU's acknowledgement of its negative heritage.

The 1992 Maastricht Treaty altered the European identity narrative (Pryke, 2019). Previously, the Copenhagen Declaration of European Identity, the Tindemans Report and the Solemn Declaration discussed a one-sided identity based on common values represented by high culture and specific cultural heritage sites seen as the roots of the European identity. On the other hand, the term identity is absent from the Maastricht Treaty. Nonetheless, core elements of identity, such as history, culture, traditions, and cultural heritage, are referenced. Additionally, the promotion of European identity is tasked with honouring both solidarity among peoples and respect for their history, cultures, and traditions: "*The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore*" (European Commission, 1992, Article 128). This quote explains the two elements composing the Maastricht narrative on identity. On one hand, the European identity cannot ignore diversity among its people, and the EU narrative cannot be reduced to an

uncritical discourse of one homogeneous identity. On the other hand, identity remains interpreted as centred on a common and singular European identity whose promotion overshadows the celebration of national and regional ones.

As previously described, the emotions stirred by cultural and identity discourse are powerful catalysts for both support and opposition to European integration (Wodak, 2020). Thus, ignoring the diversity among the European people and promoting a homogenising narrative can have adverse effects, as it alienates those who feel marginalised by globalisation, the "losers" of globalisation. Emphasising unity without acknowledging diversity risks undermining the identity of those most closely tied to their nation and local community, creating an opportunity for Eurosceptic politicians to exploit these fears (Emanuele, Marino and Angelucci, 2020). Acknowledging the need to respect national and regional diversity, the Maastricht Treaty makes a step forward toward a less elitist, homogenising and more decentralised vision of identity, while maintaining the idea of a common cultural heritage.

Moreover, the Maastricht Treaty established two essential elements for European identity: European citizenship and formal legal competence in the cultural sector (Verderame, 2017). Additionally, it promoted a set of shared fundamental rights understood as common European values, encouraged cultural cohesion, and established EU symbols, as the EU flag, anthem, and Europe Day, fundamental "invented traditions" for strengthening a sense of belonging to a common Europe (Fuchs, 2011; Verderame, 2017).

Respectively, the European City of Culture program began to include decentralised culture that could represent European diversity within the idea of highlighting the common cultural heritage. In 1990, Glasgow was nominated City of Culture, followed by Dublin (1991) and Antwerp (1993), other port cities known for their industry and labour culture (Immler and Sakkers, 2014).

In addition to respecting diversity, the EU also began acknowledging its negative heritage. In 1993, former Nazi concentration camps were enlisted as European Historical Monuments, and in 1995, the European Parliament established a European Holocaust Remembrance Day (Calligaro, 2014). The inclusion of wars and authoritarian regimes in the official heritage narrative marked a broadening of the cultural foundation upon which European identity was built. In European discourse, the totalitarian regimes, Fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism, were framed as a collective experience and a shared legacy, reinforcing a sense of common European identity (ibid.).

In the 1990s, the discourse on European identity expanded to embrace within the common cultural heritage the appreciation for diversity and acknowledgement of the darker chapters of European history. Nevertheless, as evidenced by the words of the Maastricht Treaty and the selection of major cities for the European Cities of Culture Program, the emphasis remained on a high, homogenising form of culture. However, by the end of the decade, a clearer shift toward celebrating cultural diversity and decentralising cultural representation became more prominent in the official identity narrative.

3.4 2000s: Diversities for a Vague and Complete Identity

At the beginning of the new century, the fostering of European identity was consolidated as essential for Europe's peaceful existence, and it was only a matter of filling its immaterial void with characterisation that made sense for a continuously evolving union. The "cultural Europeanisation," the third wave of integration, after the economic and political ones, was in its prime (Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). The acknowledgement of the importance of diversity and the delocalisation of culture had begun in the previous decades, and the enlargement perspective was calling for an ever-different understanding of European identity. The 2000s exemplified the consolidation of respect for the diversities of European cultures, matched by the vagueness characterising European identity and the establishment of European identity as a framework for dialogue between diverse cultures sharing links and roots. In this section, I will discuss the emergence of intercultural dialogue following the enlargement, the role of Postfunctionalism, the adoption of Europe's motto, and the institutionalisation of the ECoC program. I will conclude referencing the effects of the 2015 refugee crisis, the COVID Pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in identity discourse.

In the 2000s, the EU had to tackle major changes and crises, which modified its priorities and identity narrative. The 2004 European enlargement had a significant impact on identity discourse, which saw a boost to engage the Eastern states in the Union and encourage the newcomers to showcase their cultural assets, and promote a sense of cultural equality with the older MSs (Lähdesmäki, 2014). With the enlargement, European diversity was transformed by the emergence of the concept of intercultural dialogue, which was used to "*promote understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies*" (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, 1995). This intercultural dialogue was intended to unfold within the system of shared values and a common heritage that can be found in Greek, Roman, and Byzantine civilisations. It is important to note that the official European discourse had previously used these civilisations to characterise a single European identity. Instead, now, intercultural dialogue appears to suggest the existence of distinct cultures

and identities that nonetheless each share common foundations, and these commonalities are the essence of European identity (Calligaro, 2014).

Furthermore, the 2008 Eurocrisis had contrasting effects on identity discourse. On one hand, the economic recession reduced cultural policies' perceived importance and funding; on the other, the crisis, coupled with growing dissatisfaction and mistrust toward the EU, intensified efforts toward building a more unified and coherent entity (Lähdesmäki, 2014).

Moreover, the early 2000s witnessed the rise of a new theoretical framework: post-functionalism, which emphasised the crucial importance of fostering a shared identity. As previously explained, the permissive consensus of deals between technocrat elites, characteristic of the early years of European integration, evolved into constraining dissensus due to the awakening of public opinion on EU matters (Hooghe and Marks, 2008). European citizens became more aware of Europe's power, which was perceived as cold, distant and bureaucratic. As a result, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks recognised the necessity of acknowledging the role played by citizens' identification in the project to contrast the dissensus, and disputed Haas's conviction in the dominance of interests over the irrationality of identity. Hooghe and Marks (2008) believed that the EU had to engage in identity discourses because ordinary citizens lacked the knowledge or time to ponder their economic interests in supporting the EU project. Instead, they relied on cues which engage identity, making it an essential discourse (ibid.; Kuhn, 2019).

Therefore, at the beginning of the new century, the European Community offered an explicit cue to engage its citizens' emotions. In 2000, the European Community adopted "United in diversity" as its official motto to reflect how Europeans have united to pursue peace and prosperity while being enriched by the diverse cultures, traditions, and languages across the Union (European Union, 2000). This motto and the policymakers' explanation are interesting because they focus on sociological, identitarian and cultural aspects rather than economic and bureaucratic ones. It refers to people's diversities coming together for a common purpose, not only without undermining their differences but also narrating them as the strength of the Union. It embodies the diverse identities of Europe's citizens based on their various territories and cultures. In this regard, Johan Fornäs (2012) draws a connection between identity formation and symbols that helps understand the importance of the cultural focus of the motto. He states that identities develop due to "*signification processes*" (p.43) centred around groups or individuals. In other words, the motto represents a tool employed by the Union to cultivate collective identification (Fornäs, 2012).

All the same, this motto has been criticised because of its vagueness. It is a contradiction in terms that, by using words with opposite meanings, it says everything and nothing (ibid.). As a result, it fails to deliver clear guidelines or principles by which the European population can identify. On the other hand, the vagueness of the motto provides sufficient space for the complex composite Unity, which was the European project, to choose, mix and comprehend in various ways the highly differentiated conglomerate of elements that the diverse territories and cultures offer (ibid.). The vagueness of this motto characterises European identity in a completely different way from selected common high cultural heritage or values. However, it can be disregarded as a political stratagem fit to follow any practical characterisation. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the policies and programs used to make sense of this "United in diversity."

In the year 2000, the title of European City of Culture was awarded to all nine cities that applied, including those that would typically have been considered under the European Cultural Month scheme. The year 2000 also marked the first time that cities from non-EU countries, such as Bergen, Kraków, Prague, and Reykjavik, were selected as City of Culture (Garcia and Cox, 2013). These decisions highlight the wish to consolidate culture as the tool for fostering identity, delocalise it, and understand European identity as the framework allowing dialogue between diversities.

Furthermore, in 1999, a joint Decision by the European Parliament and the Council (Decision 1419/1999/EC) established, for the first time, a legislative framework for the European Cities of Culture programme, officially designating it as a Community action for the years 2005 to 2019. The program was renamed the European Capital of Culture, but its core objective remained unchanged: to "*highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures and the features they share, as well as to promote greater mutual acquaintance between European citizens*" (European Parliament and Council, 1999, Art. 1). The balance is mantained among the celebration of cultural diversity and the existance of common features (Garcia and Cox, 2013). European identity was no longer seen as rooted solely in a one and only type of high, traditional cultural heritage or common values, and it also moved beyond mere recognition of people's diversity.

The ECoC program is a great way to understand what European identity has come to signify. In 2013, the European Commission (EC) explained the aim of the programme around three goals that match the European identity narrative: "*highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures*"; "*celebrate the cultural ties that link Europe together*"; and "*bring people from different European countries into contact with each other's culture and promote cultural understanding*" (Garcia and Cox, 2013). The European identity narrative is no longer the celebration of culture and cultural heritage shared

by all people. Instead, it is the framework that allows the dialogue, meetings, understanding and celebration of the various European cultures and the links between them.

From a different perspective, the rhetoric of European identity as a framework for meeting and sharing among European cultures was tested by the 2015 refugee crisis. The high flux of migrants and refugees, mostly from the Middle East, highlighted the exclusionary, "othering" base of the European identity (Fuller, 2024). Poulist and far-right movements started to highlight the necessity of cultural links to be included in the framework of European identity, and lost sight of the previous achievements (Postelnicescu, 2016).

Both the COVID pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to different extents, increased the solidarity among Europeans and their feeling of belonging. Regarding the COVID Pandemic, the main difference with other crises, such as the Eurozone or the refugee crisis, which did not bring Europe together, but quite the opposite, is that all the States were affected and none were to blame. The coming together of Europe is evident in the EU's implementation of a series of measures aimed at curbing the spread of the pandemic and facilitating the recovery of its MSs, most notably through the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery package. Following intense negotiations, all MSs agreed NGEU would be financed through collective borrowing from the markets, an unprecedented act of solidarity within the Union (Papageorgiou and Immonen, 2023). In this regard, Nicoli et al. (2024) found that attachment to Europe is significantly influenced by times of crisis. During the COVID crisis, this effect was markedly stronger for respondents who had direct personal experience, either through their own infection or that of a close family member.

In the same way, the Russian invasion of Ukraine determined a cohesive response of the EU, and significantly increased attachment to Europe and support for European integration, even among already pro-European, lower-threatened populations. Thus, it is likely that the impact was even stronger among the general population in Western Europe, where the EU's protective role has become more apparent, and in higher-threat countries like Poland and the Baltic States (Steiner et al., 2022). The shared external threat and unified EU responses have played a key role in fostering a feeling of belonging to the EU and strengthening the characterisation of European identity as a meeting place and framework for dialogue and solidarity.

3.5 2025: The Consolidation of the Duality of Identity

Over the last 25 years, the European identity has consolidated as a double space for dialogue between diversities and the consolidation of shared similarities. Published by the Commission on 12 November 2025, the Culture Compass places culture at the centre of the EU

identity, emphasising its relevance for individuals, communities and the EU (EP, 2026). With the 2025 Culture Compass, the EU aims at leveraging "[…] *Europe's rich cultural diversity* […]" (EC, 2025a:2) for "[…] *promoting and elevating culture as an expression of Europe's history and shared values* […]" (*ibid*, p. 2). Culture is the core of European identity. This culture, the heart of European identity, is diverse. However, it is not limited to diverse individuals and communities, but it connects the whole EU, enhancing cohesion. European identity is described as the framework where diversities are celebrated and the place to emphasise the connections they share.

Furthermore, point 9 of the correlated "Draft Joint Declaration "Europe for Culture - Culture for Europe"" explains cultural heritage as "[…] *symbol of unity in diversity and cornerstone of our identity* […]" (EC, 2025b:3), highlighting the importance of protecting and promoting Europe's cultural and natural heritage while connecting diverse professionals and fostering intergenerational exchange.

Lastly, 29% of the Special Eurobarometer 562, 6% more than in 2019, indicated culture as what creates a sense of community among European citizens, making it the first element in the list (EC, 2025c). This result highlights the evidence of culture as the core of European identity and the importance of studying the two elements together to understand the significance behind the EU concept of European identity.

Summing up, at the beginning of the European project, identity was disregarded as something useless or a natural consequence of economic integration. During the 1970s, European institutions recognised the potential of fostering a sense of belonging among their people, beginning to celebrate a European identity rooted in a shared European cultural heritage and values. The respect for the diversities within Europe and the delocalisation of identity to include non-high, traditional culture was the focus of the 1990s' identity discourse. European identity meant a common but varied culture. After the 2004 enlargement, European institutions began to characterise Europe as the space of "Unity in diversity." The 2025 Culture Compass confirmed that European identity comprises two key dimensions: it is a framework for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and celebration of Europe's diverse cultures; and a space to highlight and strengthen the connections that unite them. The many EU crises shift the weight between one or the other element of the European identity characterisation. Through these changes, culture and cultural heritage remained the central part of identity discourse, and the ECoC program evolved with these shifts in the EU's narrative of European identity.

Given the evolution of the EU's narrative on European identity, and especially in light of recent developments, it is interesting to examine which dimension is most emphasised by

individual post-COVID cities selected as ECoC. Do they create a forum for understanding and discussing the differences between their own and other European cultures? Do they emphasise and foster the shared links and roots that make their culture European? Or do they balance the two sides?

4. WHAT SHAPES IDENTITY?

In the previous chapter, we established the EU institutions' long-lasting commitment to promoting European identity, its relationship with culture, and the academic interest in its meaning and evolution. Exploring the EU institutions' evolving approach to identity, culture has been identified as a constant core of the European identity narrative. Most recently, the literature based on EU institutions' communications has understood the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity as comprising two elements: a space to highlight European cultural interconnections and a framework for dialogue among them. Moreover, the excursus storico has revealed that, having evolved alongside the EU's narrative and reinforced the connection between identity and culture, the ECoC programme represents a lens to examine how Europeans understand and interpret European identity.

To better ground the analysis, this section develops a theoretical framework to examine identity, its formation and its evolution within an individual and a community. The following questions regarding identity formation will be answered in this section:

- What is identity? What characterises identity?
- How does identity behave in society? Can external forces influence identity?

The meaning of identity is essential to grasp the importance of studying it in the context of the complex EU community, and proving the possibility of an external force influencing individuals' identity formation, evolution, and constitution is necessary to confirm the role of the EU institutions: only if identity is shapeable by external forces, examining EU communications becomes relevant to the European identity formation analysis.

To answer these questions, the chapter will draw on Thomas Risse's constructionist approach to explain identity formation and employ his "marble cake" model to justify how people's identities shift in response to social cues, underscoring the importance of events like the ECoC programme. Additionally, the section will discuss Risse's influences, namely Michael Bruter's theory of multiple identities and Benedict Anderson's imagined community, which highlight the need for flexibility and vagueness in identity discourse.

While personal identities, such as gender, age or religion and work experience, are empirically important and shape people's experiences and trajectories (Bruter, 2005; Fadjukoff et al., 2016; Héliot et al., 2019), this research brackets them in order to focus specifically on territorial identity to elucidate the formation of European identity. These dimensions are treated as background conditions rather than objects of analysis. Therefore, we will disregard the many kinds of personal identity and focus on the three main types of identity described by the EU narrative

and Special Eurobarometer 508: local or regional identity, national identity, and European identity (Becuwe and Baneth, 2021).

4.1 One Person, Multiple Identities

Identity will be outlined as "*a set of characteristics that connotes something/someone and that implies a difference from something else/someone else.*" (Banini and Ilovan, 2021:2). These general terms frame identity as an ongoing, influenceable social process rather than a fixed personal fact (Bee, 2008). Additionally, identity is closely connected to culture. Stuart Hall (2009:2) writes, "*culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways.*" Thus, it is most probable that people who share an identity will also share a culture, and participation in a cultural event will promote a similar type of identity.

Thus, can European identity exist? If an individual can only identify with their nation-state, other identities, such as local or European, must conflict and cannot coexist within the person (Bruter, 2005). This "zero-sum model" suggests that identifying with one social group diminishes identification with others (Risse, 2000). However, the establishment of supranational institutions has eroded this perspective. Thus, plausible assumptions supported by Special Eurobarometer 508 are that a person's identity is not monolithic and that EU citizens, being in contact with many realities, identify with multiple ones (Becuwe and Baneth, 2021).

Risse's constructivist approach explains European identity as socially constructed, multi-layered, and shaped through discourse, institutions, and everyday interactions. Identities are continuously negotiated in public spheres by political actors, media, and citizens (Risse and Grabowsky, 2008). Therefore, the ECoC programme is fertile ground to foster European identity, and the related communications are essential in shaping the intended identity.

To address the relationship between multiple identities, Risse built on Bruter's (2005) application of the subsidiarity principle to identity theory. This principle advocates for decisions to be made at the lowest possible level of government, based on the individuals affected by it. He states that multiple identities coexist within an individual, simultaneously, but are organised according to territorial proximity (Lähdesmäki, 2014). This relationship is visualised as concentric circles with individual identity at the core, surrounded by local, regional, national, and European identities. The size of each circle holds meaning. Some citizens may be strong identifiers by nature, with large circles at every level; others may be weak identifiers, with all circles being small and less meaningful; while some may place greater value on certain levels than others (Bruter, 2005).

Accordingly, multiple identities can coexist, with some being more relevant than others depending on the person.

Thus, each individual embodies multiple identities, and understanding how people relate to their identities is crucial for comprehending how institutions can promote one type over another (Bee, 2008). Can external forces influence which identity is more silent?

4.2 Identities Movements

Risse (2000), building on Bruter's use of the subsidiarity principle applied to identity theory, developed the "marble cake" model to examine whether these identity layers are fixed or fluid, and what shapes their order. Risse applied the concept of "entitativity" from social psychology, which suggests that individuals are more likely to identify with or reject a social group as a social context becomes more salient in their lives (Yzerbyt et al., 2000). Thus, as the EU becomes more significant in people's lives, European identification should strengthen. This led to the "marble cake" model, where individuals' multiple identities are nested or embedded within one another rather than neatly layered and fixed. Additionally, they are context-dependent; social context determines which identity is most prominent at a given time (Risse, 2005). Therefore, if EU identity-focused policies make European identity more salient, people's perception of belonging to Europe increases.

At the community level, Risse states that identity emerges through communicative and institutional practices, such as political debates, cultural programmes, and media narratives, that frame Europe as Anderson's (2008) concept of "imagined community" (Risse, 2005). Thus, the EU can be explained as an "imagined community" in the sense that European identity emerges not through direct personal interactions but via shared communicative practices, public spheres, and institutional socialisation that foster a sense of collective belonging . For instance, EU institutions promote symbols (the euro, the flag, and the anthem) and socialising programmes (Erasmus programme, Europe Days, or the ECoC programme), which normalise transnational belonging (Bee, 2008; Knoll, 2024). Therefore, drawing from Risse, European identity emerges from the communicative practices and language through which the ECoC, being a cultural programme, is articulated.

Additionally, given that the EU is understood as an imagined community, there is an inherent impossibility of knowing and interacting with all the other members of this community and experiencing the same events, debates, narratives and communications (Banini and Ilovan, 2021). Therefore, interpretations of Europe vary among members, and given the different contexts in which European identity becomes salient, EU identity policies must remain flexible and vague

rather than rigid and pinpointed to specific cultural heritage elements or values (Ivic, 2024). Therefore, cultural policies that allow for adaptability throughout the community help European citizens experience and embrace European identity as prevailing (Bee, 2008).

Considering this theoretical context, individuals possess:

1. coexisting, nested multiple identities,
2. that are socially constructed,
3. and have context-related relevance.

Hence, EU identity-focused policies and programmes, such as the ECoC initiative, can make European identity more salient in people's lives and so increase their perception of belonging. However, because the EU is assimilable to an "imagined community," in which people experience Europe differently, policies and programmes promoting European identity are most effective when they offer a flexible and deliberately vague characterisation of European identity.

Thus, should the EU institutions foster one of the two elements (European interconnectedness or dialogue among diverse cultures) comprising European identity? Or, is promoting only one of the two elements counterproductive? To answer these questions, the next chapter will focus on the online communications of the four case studies selected in the methodology chapter, namely Eleusis, Kaunas, Veszprém-Balaton, and Esch-sur-Alzette. It will apply MMDA on the BBs and WSs of the selected cases to analyse which element of European identity they tend to prefer. Since the selected case studies encompass diverse areas of the EU and exhibit varied relations with it, identifying which element of European identity characterisation the ECoCs prefer will show whether EU institutions should prioritise fostering one of the two elements or both.

5. ECoC DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS: Interconnectedness or Dialogue Among Diversities?

The theoretical inquiry of the previous chapter has demonstrated that individuals have coexisting, multiple identities, the salience of which increases if the social context becomes more salient in their lives and can be influenced by external forces such as EU programmes, like the ECoC initiative (Knoll, 2024). Furthermore, viewing the EU through the lens of Anderson's concept of the imagined community, wherein uniform socialisation across all individuals of the union is unattainable, the most effective strategy for EU institutions to promote European identity lies in implementing policies and initiatives with a deliberately vague characterisation of identity. The ECoC programme exemplifies an initiative with such a deliberately ambiguous approach to identity characterisation, as it allows host cities considerable latitude to select their own themes, language, and narratives while requiring a strong emphasis on celebrating European identity (Bee, 2008; Knoll, 2024). This identity, as explored in the third chapter, is framed by EU institutions in dual terms of European interconnectedness and dialogue among diverse cultures.

As elucidated in the second chapter, the four case studies, Eleusis, Kaunas, Veszprém-Balaton, and Esch-sur-Alzette, were selected due to their geographical locations across diverse EU macro-regions, their varied historical relations with the EU and the other Member States, and the incorporation in their communications on European identity of the impacts from the most recent international developments (Basaraba, 2022; Steiner et al., 2022; Papageorgiou and Immonen, 2023).

Therefore, this section is dedicated to understanding the selected ECoCs' position on the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity and will answer the questions: How do the selected ECoCs understand and communicate the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity? Does one dimension of European identity characterisation prevail in the ECoCs' communications?

To answer these interrogatives, first, MMDA will be applied to the BBs to study their language, use of images and colours. Second, MMDA will be used to examine the cities' WSs, focusing on their language, the general "look and feel," interactive features, images and videos. The case studies are analysed collectively within the chapter sections to facilitate more effective comparisons and to detect which element of European identity they preferably emphasise.

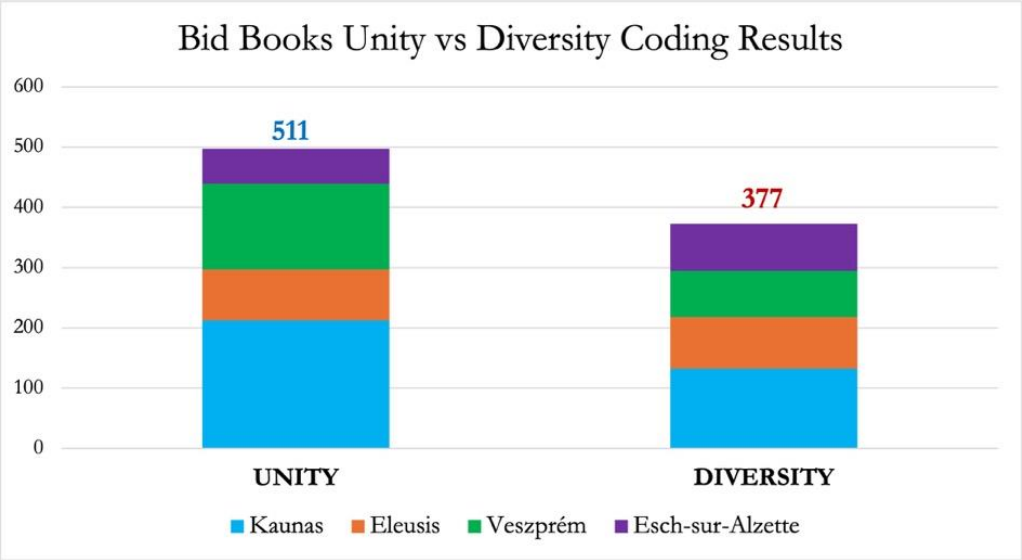
5.1 Bid Books

The analysis begins with the BBs, as they constitute the first communications issued by each ECoC and provide a comprehensive breakdown of the themes and narratives that each city intends to emphasise during its designated year. As the methodology chapter explained, only the affective sections of the BBs, namely Introduction and General Considerations, Contribution to the Long-Term Strategy, European Dimension, Cultural and Artistic Content, the Management subsection Marketing and Communication, and Additional Information, excluding the purely practical and financial ones.

5.1.1 BBs Language

The analysis of the BBs begins by examining the language employed by each ECoC to convey its understanding of European identity and continues by investigating the visual mode. The analysis of the BBs' language and visual mode follows Risse's logic that identity emerges through communicative and institutional practices, such as cultural programmes and media narratives (Risse, 2005). Thus, examining the language and visuals employed by each ECoC elucidates which element of European identity they predominantly emphasise to foster audience identification with the programme.

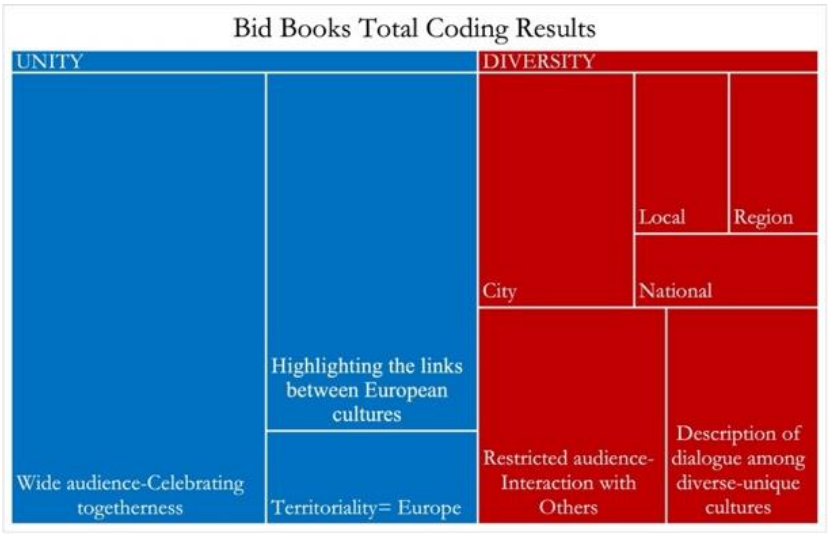
The codes described in the methodology chapter (*Unity* and *Diversity* with the three subsections: *territory*, *discourse* and *audience*) were used to read through the four BBs and capture the ECoCs characterisations of European identity.



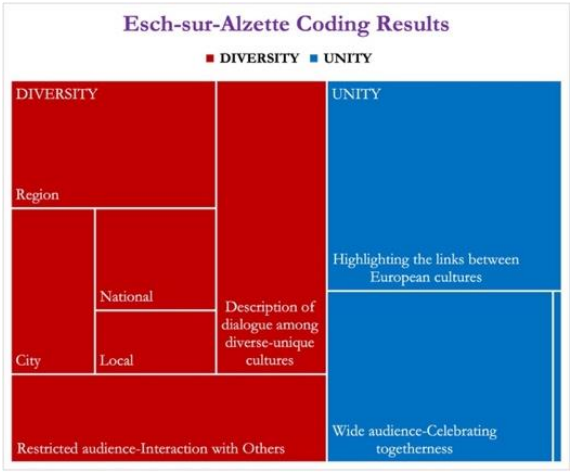
Graph 1: BBs coding results divided by ECoC.

Graph 1 summarises the results of the BBs' analysis and highlights the ECoCs' tendencies toward *Unity*. Each city presents differences in the language used and in the preference for which code subsection. However, most of the language refers to seeking connections between the ECoC's culture and other European cultures, and feeling united within a wide audience that celebrates together. This graph demonstrates that the selected ECoCs predominantly conceptualise European identity as a celebration of European intercultural interconnectedness, thereby socialising their audiences within the unity dimension of European identity.

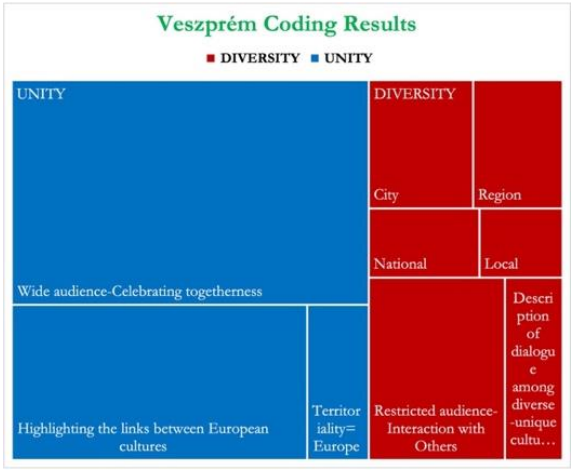
A breakdown of each BB reveals that Kaunas' BB was highly detailed and resulted in the highest number of codes, and Veszprém's language was predominantly focused on the importance of remembering and reviving Hungary's deep cultural connections with the rest of Europe. For Eleusis and Esch-sur-Alzette, the difference is not as evident.



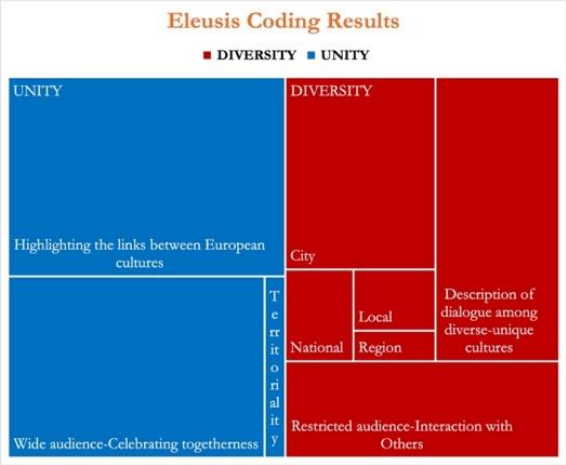
Graph 2: BBs coding results by subsection.



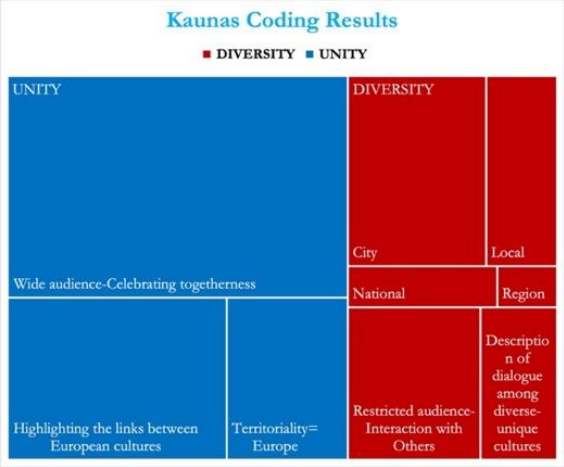
Graph 3: Esch-sur-Alzette BB coding results.



Graph 4: Veszprém BB coding results.



Graph 5: Eleusis BB coding results.



Graph 6: Kaunas BB coding results.

The three subdivisions of the *Unity* code (Graph 2) correspond to three aspects that the cities choose to highlight in their BBs. All BBs affirm the existence of interconnections among European cultures, while aspiring to forge new connections based on underexplored commonalities, and to strengthen or revive those that have faded or require nurturing (Basaraba, 2022; Clopot, 2022). Most often, these links are based on common challenges that the EU is facing, shared aspects of community life that all, or at least most, MSs endure or mutual historical experiences. Grounding their programmes in shared experiences aligns with Risse's conceptualisation of the EU as Anderson's "imagined community" (Risse, 2005). Given that individuals within the Union cannot interact directly with one another, European identity is constructed through the narration of shared experiences (Clopot, 2022).

For instance, Kaunas (p. 2), referring to its role as temporary capital, writes: "[…] *because we know we are not alone in this and a good deal of Europeans can identify with our experiences* […]." Likewise, Eleusis (p. 15) writes: "[…] *our programme focuses on the issue of public space, which is a central challenge across Europe. The loss of life in public spaces is a generalised phenomenon all over Europe* […]". Narrating shared experiences within the EU, understood as an imagined community, creates a common space in which citizens can identify with one another despite never having met.

Second, the language used in the BBs exposed a feeling of necessity to share the ECoC experience with other MSs. Many projects presented are itinerant or uploaded online. Esch-sur-Alzette BB (p. 50), referring to Pippo Delbono's production "Fantasmagorie 2222," writes that "[it] *will premiere on the courtyards of the disused industrial site, Esch-Schifflange, and then go on a European tour.*" And Kaunas BB (p. 19) mentions that "[…] *digital progress and our partnership with the best IT professionals will guarantee the efficiency of distant participation in the programme for much broader audiences than*

just itinerary travellers." Sharing their projects with other Member States enhances the salience of the European context in everyday life across all states, thereby strengthening identification with the EU (Bruter, 2005).

Third, the four ECoCs emphasise the importance of collaborating with other European artists and institutions for their programmes. This approach moves further beyond the EU conceptualisation as an imagined community by encouraging people to meet personally and consolidate existing links and co-create new narratives that socialise multiple countries into a shared identity (Liu, 2024). Eleusis highlights the importance of advancing the links between European people (p. 21): "[…] *there is another united Europe, the Europe of networks: professional networks, networks that bring together people with common interests and concerns, or simply friendship networks. These networks extend horizontally throughout the European continent,* […] *our programme is committed to networking,* […]". Additionally, all the ECoCs not only aspire to consolidate the existing links but also aim to create new networks thanks to the programme space. Vesprém (p. 18) sintetizes this in the Great Lakes of Europe event: "*We will build a new kind of cultural network: we will launch a genuine collaboration in various fields – we invite those living around the great lakes to shows us the core of their identity, their world of symbols and their decisive features.*"

Furthermore, even if the analysis highlighted the ECoCs' preference for the interconnectness of European culture, the small size of the *Unity* subsection: *Territoriality= Europe* (Graph 2) highlights the difficulty in addressing Europe as a cohesive territory. Additionally, Graph 2 shows that within the *Diversity* code, references to *City* constitute a major part of the results. This may reflect the ECoC programme's emphasis on enhancing the city's profile and the city's own enthusiasm for investing in its development. However, coupled with the lack of reference to Europe as a unified territorial entity and the wide presence of references to segmented territoriality, it suggests that the land and the language connected to territoriality remain strongly tied to the MS (Havlík, 2022).

In addition, although most planned events aim to engage a broad European audience, they are often centred on local citizens, their reconnection with, or renewed appreciation of, their city, and their role in the dialogue with other European cultures. The feeling of togetherness with a wide European audience is certainly strong, but the focus on the local citizens cannot be ignored. This is surely linked to the need for local support of the programme. However, it could be recognised as a way to acknowledge their centrality in the dialogue between European cultures. For instance, Eleiusis writes (p. 55): "*Inviting the local communities to take care of and exploit the trees' fruits we aim to raise awareness with respect to public space and encourage citizens' participation in activities of collective*

character that aim to advance their neighbourhoods." The focus on local citizens in the selected ECoCs highlights their central role in fostering dialogue between European cultures and serves as a foundational starting point for constructing European identity. European identity is deeply embedded in local contexts, where everyday life, shared experiences and local cultural heritages shape how people narrate and experience their sense of belonging to Europe (Risse, 2005; Scalise, 2015). Local citizens' narratives and experiences are crucial for imagining Europe as a shared community beyond institutional or elite-driven identities (Zappettini, 2020). Thus, the ECoCs' emphasis on local citizens and the dialogue between local culture and other European cultures aligns with Risse's (2005) conception of context-dependent, socially constructed identities, thereby underscoring the significance of the *Diversity* element in the European identity formation process.

Finally, when the uniqueness of the city's culture and identity was emphasised, it was most often presented as a vehicle for fostering dialogue with other European cultures, aiming to enrich the local context through the understanding of European cultural diversity. Veszprém writes on page 16: "*Exposure starts a new dialogue. It uses our unique regional history of being a meeting point of cultures and ideas to introduce otherness - the notion of difference, which challenges homogenous regions like us.*" In contrast, the Esch-sur-Alzette BB presents the region as a model to be emulated and followed by the other European cultures, placing more emphasis on showcasing its desirable peculiarity rather than fostering a reciprocal dialogue and mutual understanding between European cultures. The Esch-sur-Alzette BB (p. 37) writes: "*Learning about our specific multilingualism will greatly benefit many regions of Europe.*" and, referring to the region's sense of belonging to Europe, highlights that "*There is no sign of the Europe-fatigue that seems to have spread so widely in other countries.*" (p. 23).

Regarding the embedded voices and points of view, all the BBs have a dominant voice speaking, which is one and united. It embeds the voice of the city, which comes to life thanks to the ECoC programme. It represents a section of the city's citizens and is separate from Europe or the other MSs. Among others, Kaunas writes at the beginning of the BB (p. 2): "*Remember us? Yes, we are the same citizens of Kaunas with a wish TO RETURN OUR CITY TO EUROPE by competing for the title of European Capital of Culture in the second round.*"

Overall, all the BBs point to a description of European identity in line with the EU institutions' characterisations. The BBs language tends, albeit without strong emphasis, to favour underlining the links and commonalities between European cultures, primarily by stressing the importance of both active and passive participation of people from all over Europe and expressing a commitment to addressing common European challenges. Esch-sur-Alzette BB stands as an exception, highlighting the peculiarity and uniqueness of its region and positioning it as a model

from which other MSs can learn. However, even in adopting the role of a "teacher" within the dialogue among diversities, it promotes a dialogue among European cultures.

5.1.2 BBs General Feeling and Visual Mode

The second step of the MMDA is to study the other modes of communication present in the BBs with the same aim of understanding whether one of the two elements (cultural interconnectedness or dialogue among diversities) used by the EU institutions to describe European identity prevails. Considering the absence of the audio mode, the analysis will first explore the look and feel (Pauwels, 2012) of the general BBs, and, in particular, of the first page, which is the entry gate into the BBs. Second, the images used in the various sections of the BBs will be examined, following the study by Aiello and Thurlow (2006). These two modes are analysed to determine which narrative each ECoC tends towards, thereby identifying the element through which audiences are predominantly socialised, and consequently the nature of the European identity they construct (Risse and Grabowsky, 2008).

Regarding the general feeling, the BBs neither bluntly connect to Europe nor to their MS or city. The tone and style of the BBs are generally neutral, possibly reflecting an intentional effort to establish an ideologically impartial starting space for their programmes with features every European culture can identify with (Aiello and Thurlow, 2006), or alternatively, a strategic choice to withhold detail to engage the reader's curiosity, luring them into the programme. This is evident from the first page of the BBs.

Figure 2: Eleusis BB first page.

Eleusis BB's first page (Figure 2) is the exception. It presents the name of the programme, the name of the city, a reference to the ECoC programme, and two clear reminders of the city and the theme of the year: water and the industrial setting, which, however, become shared links

between European cultures in the programme explanations. Kaunas and Veszprém BBs' first pages (Figures 3 and 4) present the logos with the city's names and the ECoC writing. However, the images chosen for the front page of these two BBs are very general and leave room for self-identification by a broad European audience (Bee, 2008; Ivic, 2024). Neutrality is a weak word to describe Esch-sur-Alzette BBs first page (Figure 5), which leaves complete freedom to the imagination and self-identification. The vagueness of the images selected for the BBs' covers aligns with the theorisation that the more generic an identity policy, the more effective it proves in consolidating or constructing identity (Fornäs, 2012). This is because such generality enables diverse citizens within an imagined community, in this case the EU, to identify with the pictures they encounter. EU citizens experience the EU in many different ways, thereby ascribing diverse meanings to it (Risse, 2005). Consequently, when an image associated with an EU cultural programme avoids strict reference to any single, specific facet of European identity, citizens encountering it are less likely to feel excluded.

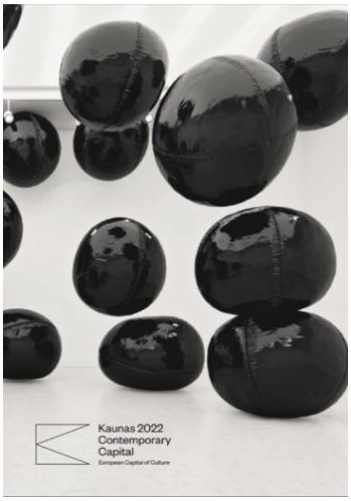


Figure 3: Kaunas BB first page.

Figure 4: Veszprém BB first page.

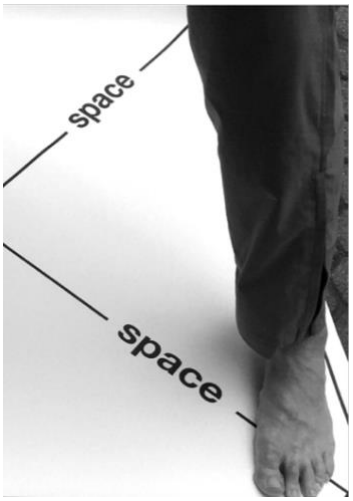


Figure 5: Esch-sur-Alzette BB first page.

As for the cover pictures, the colours chosen by the ECoCs are neither obviously connected to the EU nor the city or nation. Orange for Eleusis, lime green and blue (maybe a reference to the EU) for Veszprém, black and white for Kaunas and light blue and red for Esch-sur-Alzette (Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9). The colours maintain that neutral feeling in which everybody can feel like they belong. Instead, the colours are primarily tied to the programmes' themes themselves, placing the ECoCs' frameworks at the forefront. This suggests a neutral space for dialogue between diverse cultures, one that appears deliberately detached from the specific identities of the city.

Figure 6: Eleusis BB colour.

Figure 7: Veszprém BB colours.

Figure 8: Kaunas BB colours.

Figure 9: Esch-sur-Alzette BB colours.

In contrast to Nicole Basaraba's (2022) findings regarding the ECoC between 2014 and 2019, the layouts, colours and designs of each ECoC selected in this research vary widely from one another. However, the images used often correspond to an updated version of the categories described by Aiello and Thurlow's (2006) study. Despite the absence of centralised rules and formal programme visual identity guidelines, there is a general uniformity in the visual types employed by the four ECoCs.

First, there is a wide use of landscapes and cityscapes to "*avoid the specificity of human faces in favour of the genericity of (European) places*" (Aiello and Thurlow, 2006:153). Images depicting general landscapes and cityscapes, and featuring buildings or nature from a distance (Figures 10, 11 and 12), are broadly relatable, fostering a sense of interconnectedness among European cultures and communicating a sense of shared experience, while still maintaining a clear focus on the city itself.

Figure 10: Veszprém BB cityscape.

Figure 11: Kaunas BB landscape.

Figure 12: Esch-sur-Alzette BB cityscape.

Second, images of children or crowds are used to evoke the same sense of generic familiarity, aiming to create a visual narrative in which every European culture can self-identify (Figures 13, 14, 15 and 16) (Ivic, 2024). Images of children and crowds are cross-culturally available, strategically safe and unthreatening (Thurlow et al., 2005). They are "de-territorialised" symbols, being both specific and generic and behaving as a link between cultures (García Canclini, 2004). Once again, the selection of vague portrayals of social life, liable to identification by every citizen, represents a powerful strategy for identity construction in an imagined community (Risse 2005).

Figure 13: Kaunas children.

Figure 14: Esch-sur-Alzette children.

Figure 15: Eleusis children.

Figure 16: Veszprém children.

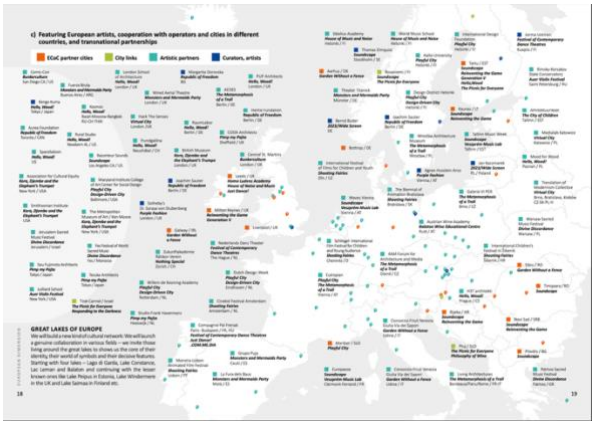
Third, the use of maps (Map 1 and 2) tends to diverge from the *Unity* discourse, positioning the ECoC within the European space as a distinct place and cultural entity. This framing suggests the city as one of the speakers in the dialogue with other places and cultures represented on the maps, rather than as a symbol of European interconnectedness. Maps are cross-culturally available texts used by the ECoCs to locate themselves within Europe and the world (Aiello and Thurlow, 2006). However, by including a zoom in from Europe to the city, ECoCs try to draw attention to themselves and communicate their will to be located at the ideological heart of Europe (Lähdesmäki et al., 2021a). They spell out their aspiration to be European cultures, while keeping

their peculiarities, setting up the framework for dialogue between their unique voice and all the other European cultures represented on the map.

However, Veszprém Map 3 conveys a different message. It shows Europe and includes all the European partners participating in the Great Lakes of Europe event, without zooming into any MS. By visually representing Europe as a unified space thanks to the ECoC event, this map communicates a clear message of interconnectedness and collaboration among European cultures for shared interests and identity.

Map 1: Kaunas BB.

Map 2: Veszprém BB.



Map 3: Veszprém BB.

Fourth are pictures representing cultural performances. When comparing the post-COVID BBs with the performances' images analysed by Aiello and Thurlow's (2006) study, a consistent message of shared cultural links emerges. However, the themes of the images chosen changed completely. The ECoCs shifted from searching shared links in the past to a common aspiration for modernity and innovation in the future. "*The shared contemporary identity*" is not created anymore "*through appeals to an ancient or classical past* […]" (Aiello and Thurlow, 2006:158). Instead, that shared identity is sought in contemporary art performances, unusual industrial and rural settings, or street and performance art (Figures 17, 18, 19, and 20). In addition, ECoCs often connected culture with technology and innovation (Figures 21 and 22), as a common European interest which is revolutionising daily lives.

Figure 17: Eleusis performance.

Figure 18: Esch-sur-Alzette performance.

Figure 19: Kaunas performance.

Figure 20: Veszprem performance.

Figure 21: Kaunas technology representation.

Figure 22: Veszprém technology representation.

This shift in cultural representation demonstrates that the exclusionary pretence of a common past has given way to a will to build a common pioneering future. However, this representation still involves a selective portrayal of certain aspects of European culture, reflecting ideological and political constructions of European interconnectedness (Delanty and Rumford, 2005). By focusing on contemporary performances and technology not rooted in any specific local or national context, the ECoC's selection of images contributes to the construction of a collective identity and a common European ground.

Summing up, the ECoCs' BBs don't overwhelmingly side with one element of the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity. However, they tend to prioritise searching for and celebrating the links between European cultures. Overall, the language prioritises common challenges or shared aspects of community life and celebrates acting together as a united audience or event producer. The most critical aspect of fostering European interconnectedness lies in addressing Europe as a cohesive, united territory.

Regarding the visual mode, the images used are often general and neutral, allowing the reader to identify with them. Comprehensively, the visual mode communicates the intention to use the links between European cultures to capture the reader's attention. However, within the visual mode, maps are the outlier. They tend to enhance the voice of the city, creating a framework for dialogue among European diversities rather than for self-identification.

In conclusion, the BBs tend to prioritise the *Unity* of European interconnectedness, while still acknowledging, without sidelining, the importance of fostering a framework for dialogue among cultural diversity. In the next section, the focus will be on the WSs' communication, aiming to understand their stance on cultural interconnectedness or dialogue among diversities.

5.2 Websites

Having studied the ECoCs BBs, the WSs created by each ECoC during their year will now be examined to have a full understanding of the narrative each city used to talk about European identity. The analysis of the ECoCs WSs will follow the MMDA designed for websites (Pauwels, 2012), explained in the methodology chapter, and mirror the same structure as the BBs analysis to make the two examinations as comparable as possible. Because WSs are inherently highly multimodal platforms, the focus of the study will be as much on the language used as on the other modes the WSs use to communicate identity-related narratives. First, as for the BBS, the study will focus on the language employed in each WS to discuss the themes and plans for the year and to describe the events. Second, it will examine the visual and audiovisual modes by applying the codes to the WSs' presentation, the available interactive features, and the ECoCs' promotional videos.

5.2.1 WSs Language

The analysis of the WSs' language follows the same codes (*Unity* and *Diversity* with the three subsections: *territory*, *discourse* and *audience*) used to analyse the BBs, to understand whether the ECoCs' communication tends more toward celebrating links between European cultures or fostering a framework for dialogue between European diversities. By analysing the terms and concepts used in the WSs, we can understand which element of European identity each ECoC leans towards. To study the WSs' language, the *Unity* and *Diversity* codes have been applied to the homepage, the "About" section, and the "News" section. These sections have been identified as the ones appearing in all the WSs of the selected cities and containing a considerable amount of reference to identity narratives.

As stated in the methodology chapter, the "Way Back Machine" of the "Internet Archive" was used to recover the WSs' version available during the ECoCs years. Retrieving the ECoC-year versions of the WSs was essential to determine the nature of the narrative to which the audience was exposed during that period, thereby identifying the predominant element of European identity through which they were socialised. In this section, the analysis will focus on the languages, words and phrases used by each city in its WSs to identify which element of European identity characterisation they prefer.

The homepages of the WSs changed throughout the year, but they maintained the same general features. Overall, and somewhat in contrast with the coding results of the BBs' language described in the section above, the WSs' discourse places greater emphasis on establishing a framework for dialogue among diverse European cultures (*Diversity-Description of dialogue among diverse-unique cultures*). Additionally, there is a great focus on the ECoC city and local citizens (*Diversity: Segmented territory: City* and *Diversity: Restricted audience-Interaction with Others*), valorised through their role in creating and fostering a space for dialogue among European diversities. The city and citizens are the centre of the ECoC program framework, which encourages dialogue among diverse cultures (Scalise, 2015). The language does not exclude or oppose other European cultures, but highlights the ECoC program as an opportunity for the city and its citizens to dialogue with "*Others*." In this regard, it is significant to note that the WSs' expected audience is the general public, engaging with the programme in person or online, rather than the EU institutions. Thus, the ECoCs might see the city's citizens as the target to prioritise.

All the homepages (Figures 23, 24, 25 and 26) feature the ECoC logo, written in English, at the top of the page, highlighting the centrality of the city and clearly branding the WS as the space of the ECoC project. Kaunas and Esch-sur-Alzette homepages present highly engaging opening messages that express a willingness to initiate dialogue and collaborate with the widest audience. The message conveyed is that everybody is welcome, and everyone's presence enriches the event year, expanding the European identity narratives as wide as possible.

Figure 23: Eleusis WS homepage.

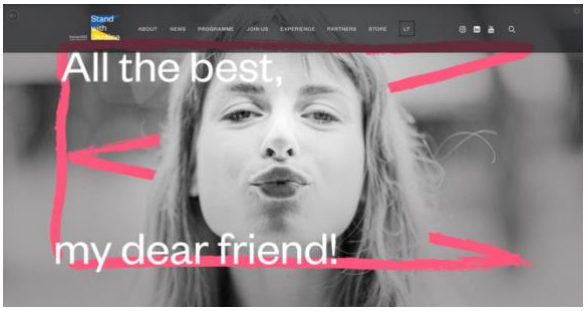


Figure 24: Kaunas WS homepage.

Figure 25: Esch-sur-Alzette WS homepage.

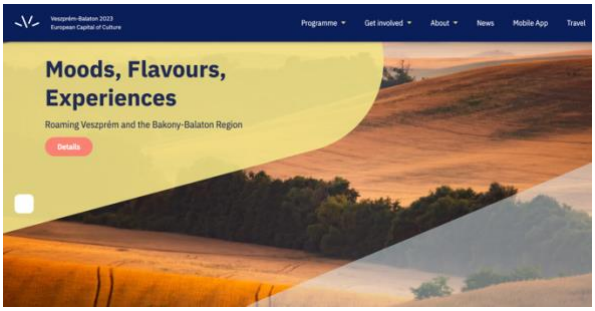


Figure 26: Veszprém WS homepage.

The "About" section of the WSs explains the city's intentions, its main guidelines and purposes, and the main steps of its programme. On the Veszprém homepage, a section reads: "*The Veszprém-Balaton 2023 European Capital of Culture programme is a celebration for this town and region, helping the area advance to the status of a major European cultural scene and tourist destination.*" Moreover, Kaunas' "About the project" section writes: "*With this project, it is aimed to make Kaunas and Kaunas district famous in Europe* […]". The focus is on cities and their surrounding areas, which will be able to thrive thanks to the programmes' opportunity to engage other MSs. Nonetheless, the strive for a wide, active and passive audience uniting people from all over is still quite strong. Esch-sur-Alzette "European dimension" subsection of "Esch2022" reports: "*Esch2022 stands for networking of people and institutions and active participation – as many as possible should be part of this great project.*" As explained in the case of the BBs, the focus on local citizens is substantial because European identity is deeply embedded in local contexts, where individuals are most extensively socialised (Scalise, 2015). However, the ECoC's objective is to forge connections with the rest of Europe and disseminate its narratives and vision of European identity to the widest possible audience (Lähdesmäki, 2012).

Furthermore, the "Strategic Objective" in the "2023Eleusis" section talks about the ECoC project as "[…] *a unique opportunity to promote Europe's cultural diversity, as well as dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens* […]", enhancing the role of the programme in fostering a framework for conversation and exploration of other cultures. However, at the same time, Eleusis WS, on the "Artistic Vision" section, highlights the intention to promote links between European cultures: "[…] *Elefsina seems to constitute a field of research, a Model for studying contemporary European issues concerning society, people and relationships, Labour, the Environment, and sustainable Development, as these all appear to connect, collide, or cross within a modern-day city.*"

Similarly, the language used in the news articles published on the WSs tends to emphasise the celebration of a space for dialogue and mutual understanding. For instance, Kaunas's WS explains the European Culture Fair event as a space "*where traditional crafts, feasts and contemporary accents will all find their place. Lithuanian and European folk craftsmen, artists and culinary artists will be waiting for you at the Kaunas Castle.*" (Kaunas2022, 2022). As well, Esch-sur-Alzette writes: "*The Esch2022 programme celebrates Europe in all its facets: what defines Europe is the wealth of different cultures living in a community where every individual counts.* […] *we are creating an ever new dialogue between people and nations right in the heart of Europe*" (Esch2022, 2022b), highlighting the importance of being different together.

It is crucial to note that the framework for dialogue among European cultural diversities, as promoted by the ECoC programme, often serves as a place for the creation and emergence of new forms of interconnectedness among the various cultures involved (Basaraba, 2022). It

promotes cultural diversity and mutual understanding through multiple ways, such as city twinning, cultural networks, residences, and mobility of artists and volunteers, which are key to building lasting transnational ties beyond geographical proximity (Liu, 2024). Explaining the BELONG event, Esch-sur-Alzette writes: "[…] *artists teach one another arts and music from their countries and cultures, and work on mixing their styles in a unique, artistic creation* […]" (Esch2022, 2022b). Additionally, Esch-sur-Alzette explains the creation of new links thanks to the 7SÓIS LUSO MED ESCH ORKESTRA event, which "*will showcase both the diversity of the different European musical traditions as well as their interconnectedness through the common language of music.*" (Esch2022, 2022a).

Moreover, as described in the section analysing the BBs, the tendency is more toward a *Segmented territoriality* and the role of the *City* than an acknowledgement of a united Europe. The events' focus is often on enhancing and developing the city's cultural network. Dávid Szauder explains the Private Veszprém project, saying: "*When we dreamt up this project a few years ago, I was thinking about how to define a city, in this case the city of Veszprém. I think one of the most important things is the history of a place.*" (Veszprembalaton2023, 2023a). Nonetheless, the importance of cultivating a connected and widespread audience, spanning across Europe, is evident from the articles in the WSs. For instance, Veszprém "[…] *hosted six poets of European importance in the Poems in Veszprém project.* […] [They] *found excellent common ground and a valuable and active exchange of ideas took place between the lyricists at Balatonfüred Translation House.*" (Veszprembalaton2023, 2023b).

Regarding the typographic signifiers, the visual properties of the written text communicate more about the topic of the event than the ECoCs' understanding of European identity. Furthermore, as with the BBs, the voices and perspectives embedded in the news articles and homepage messages are largely unified, typically representing the ECoC programme or the city. While this voice occasionally aligns with that of the citizens, it rarely merges with Europe or the EU. Identification with the EU tends to occur only in the context of addressing challenges perceived as shared by all of humanity. Such as Eleusis, explaining the "Environment" theme of its programme, writes: "[…] *focusing on the need to redefine our relationship with nature and the environment as a prerequisite for sustainable development.* […] *corresponding to significant features of the relationship between human beings and the environment.*" The voice speaking unites all human beings.

In summary, the WS's language suggests a slightly different outcome compared to the BBs. The language used in the WSs reveals a preference for highlighting how the program created a framework favourable to communicating and understanding European cultural differences. Nevertheless, it is communicated clearly that the space for dialogue, fostered by the ECoC programme, creates an opportunity for European cultures to consolidate existing links or develop

new connections (Liu, 2024; Basaraba, 2022). Moreover, similar to the BBs' language, the focus frequently centres on the city and its citizens, who are positioned as the programme's primary audience. The ECoC programme enables local citizens to strengthen their sense of European identity through dialogue with other European cultures (Lähdesmäki, 2012; Scalise, 2015). Thereby, enthusiasm for attracting a wide audience is not separate from, but rather integral to, placing local citizens at the centre of the ECoC programme.

5.2.2 WSs General Feeling, Visual and Audio-visual Modes

Reflecting the approach taken in the analysis of the BBs, the second stage of the MMDA for WSs focuses on examining additional modes of communication beyond language to determine whether cultural interconnectedness or dialogue among diversities prevails. First, the analysis will focus on the look and feel of the homepages and the interactive features employed by the WSs. Second, the images and promotional videos uploaded on the WSs will be examined, focusing on what they communicate regarding each ECoC's understanding of European identity.

In line with the results of the WSs' language, the visual and audiovisual modes similarly emphasise the uniqueness of the ECoCs' local cultures and their valorisation thanks to their engagement in the framework of dialogue with different European cultures.

Overall, the WSs' homepages (Figures 23, 24, 25 and 26) are clearly branded as the space of the ECoC programme. The colours are the ones chosen by each city for the year, and every homepage reports the ECoC logos. There is no doubt that the cities intended to create an online space strictly dedicated to the programme. The Eleusis homepage (Figure 23) presents the year of the event, the name of the city written in Greek characters, the ECoC remark and the EU flag. This mix conveys both the centrality of Eleusis' local culture and the significance of the broader EU context, a relationship nurtured by the framework provided by the ECoC programme. Concerning the affective reaction stirred by the WSs, the homepages are very welcoming, attractive and engaging. There is no obvious emphasis on the interconnectedness of European cultures, but equally, there is no sense of exclusion conveyed. In addition, the WSs of Eleusis and Esch-sur-Alzette, and to a more limited extent, Veszprem's WS feature an accessibility tool (Figures 27, 28 and 29) manifesting a clear and active interest in engaging with the widest possible audience.

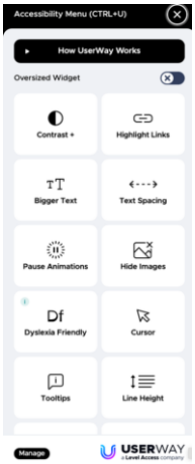


Figure 27: Eleusis accessibility tool.

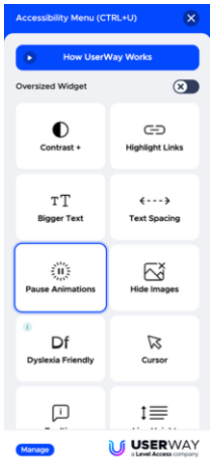


Figure 28: Esch-sur-Alzette accessibility tool.

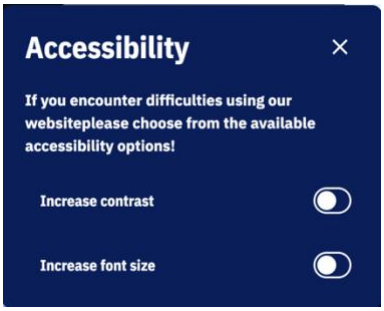


Figure 29: Veszprém accessibility tool.

The interactive features of the WSs are an essential part of understanding the message communicated by the ECoCs regarding the characterisation of European identity. All the WSs present a section dedicated to collaborating with the programme in diverse ways (Figures 30, 31, 32, and 33). Although Esch-sur-Alzette's WS does not include a dedicated section for volunteering, it does promote a series of hashtags to tag event-related pictures, thereby encouraging public participation in the programme communications. Kaunas also presents a hashtag at the end of its homepage to promote its programme (Figure 34). These interactive features reflect an aspiration to involve not only local citizens but also a broader audience interested in engaging with the programme, thereby fostering a sense of *Unity* across participants (Lähdesmäki, 2012). There is no "local citizens" interacting with "others," but a united audience contributing to the event.

Figure 30: Eleusis "Join us" feature.

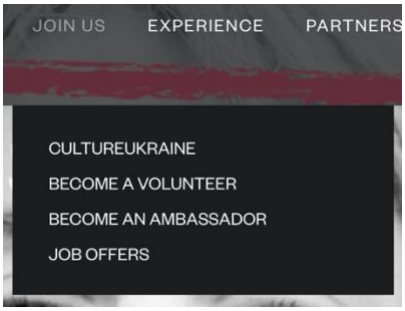


Figure 31: Kaunas "Join us" feature.

Figure 32: Veszprém "Get Involved" feature.

Figure 33: Esch-sur-Alzette "Share your story" feature.

Figure 34: Kaunas hashtag.

Generally, the messages conveyed by the homepages and the interactive features appear somewhat contrasting. While the former emphasises the creation of a space for dialogue among European diversities, beginning from the city, the latter highlights the aspiration to engage the broadest European audience possible. To gain a clearer understanding of the messages conveyed by the WSs and to assess whether one aspect of the European identity characterisation prevails over the other, the analysis now turns to the images and videos featured on these platforms.

The four WSs have a rich selection of images. Additionally, the hyperlinks direct the reader to the ECoCs' social media, which are all rich in audio-visual material.

On one hand, overall, the WSs and social media images and videos focus on the city and the ECoC events, either promoting future events, trying to engage the widest possible audience or summarising the ones that have already taken place, highlighting the success of the programme. Additionally, Kaunas, Eleusis and Veszprém social media, and in particular their YouTube channels, have a considerable part of uploaded materials in the respective countries' languages (Figures 35, 36 and 37). This emphasises the focus on the city and its citizens as the main target audience, stressing the centrality of the local culture in the dialogue between European diversities (Lähdesmäki, 2012).

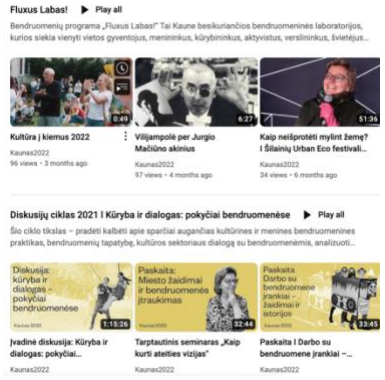


Figure 35: Kaunas YouTube page.

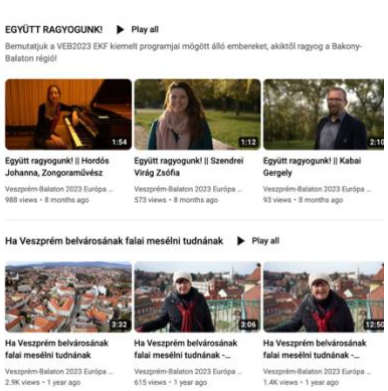


Figure 36: Veszprém YouTube page.

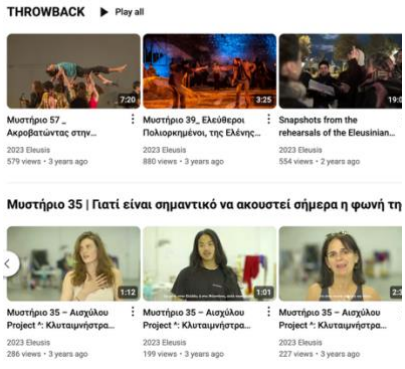


Figure 37: Eleusis YouTube page.

On the other hand, the images and videos are neutral enough for the general European audience to feel welcome and identify themselves (Fornäs, 2012). Figures 38, 39, 40, 41 and 42 depict children and crowds enjoying various events, along with landscapes and cityscapes not tied to a single specific location, celebrations, fireworks, modern and classical art and music, and enough diversity to allow a wide range of viewers to identify with the portrayed scenes (García Canclini, 2004). However, the focus on the city is explicit, positioning it at the very centre of the conversation: the images and videos are uploaded to promote the ECoC events as spaces for dialogue between the local and other European cultures (Scalise, 2015).

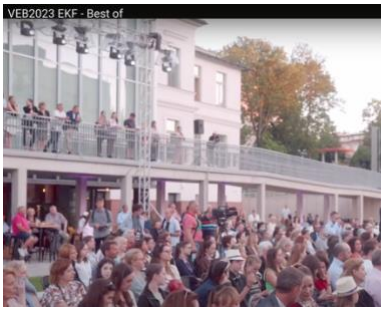


Figure 38: Veszprem video of a crowd (Veszprémbalaton2023, 2024).

Figure 39: Kaunas video of contemporary dance (Kaunas2022, 2023).

Figure 40: Esch-sur-Alzette video of fireworks (Esch2022, 2023).

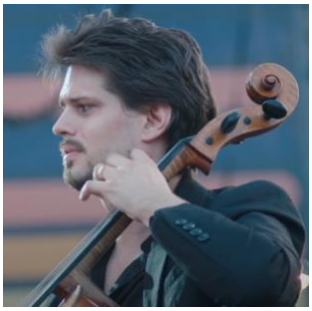


Figure 41: Veszprém video of classical music (Veszprémbalaton2023, 2024).

Figure 42: Eleusis video with cityscape (Eleusis2023, 2022).

In summary, in contrast with the BBs' general outcomes, the WSs promote the development of a framework for dialogue among diverse European cultures (more *Diversity* than *Unity*). Simultaneously, much of their communication emphasises the importance of engaging the broadest possible audience, both active and passive, and presents the ECoC programme as an opportunity to foster and shape interconnectedness among European cultures, thereby strengthening a shared sense of European identity.

6. FINDINGS and CONCLUSIONS

This chapter synthesises the analytical findings and elucidates the theoretical and practical implications of the analysis. The research question posed at the beginning of this study will be addressed, with comparisons and conclusions drawn from the analysis of the BBs and WSs of the selected cities, expanding on implications and recommendations. The principal shortcoming of this analysis lies in its inability to access the primary voices of the audience who interacted with the ECoCs' communications. Consequently, future studies could build upon this research by conducting interviews with individuals who interacted with the ECoCs' communications through the BBs and WSs, applying the same analytical framework, and enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how the ECoCs communicate European identity.

This study examines how post-COVID ECoCs understand and communicate the EU institutions' dual characterisation of European identity, namely European interconnectedness (*Unity*) and dialogue among Europe's cultural diversities (*Diversity*). To address this question, the analysis integrated Thomas Risse's constructivist framework of identity formation with a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) of two types of digital materials produced by four selected ECoCs: the official bid books submitted to the European institutions to participate in the ECoC initiative and published on the website of each city and the public-facing websites serving as the primary outreach platforms for the ECoCs to reach the widest audience possible. Four post-COVID ECoCs, namely Eleusis, Kaunas, Veszprém-Balaton, and Esch-sur-Alzette, were compared across textual, visual, and audiovisual modes to determine whether one element of the EU's identity narrative is privileged, how the two elements interact, and the implications for the EU identity narrative. The digital material was chosen to analyse communications and narratives that reached as many people as possible. The post-COVID period was selected to include the significant impact of the pandemic on MSs' relations and the growing reliance on digital outreach. And the four cities were picked because representing different macro-areas of Europe. The standardised methodology of the study and coding scheme (*Unity* vs. *Diversity*, subdivided by *territory*, *discourse*, and *audience*) ensured comparability across sources and cases.

Accordingly, the first point of the research question outlined in the study introduction (*How do the EU institutions narrate European identity?*) has been addressed by tracing the evolution of the concept of European identity from the 1950s to the contemporary understanding. As demonstrated throughout the historical overview, European identity was initially treated as either secondary to economic integration or as a natural by-product. During the 1970s and 1980s, it became increasingly associated with high-cultural heritage supposedly shared by the whole of

Europe and common values rooted in classical and Christian traditions. The 1990s marked a turning point, as respect for national and regional diversity was progressively incorporated into the narrative, thereby broadening the cultural base of what could be considered "European." Following the 2004 enlargement and subsequent crises, EU institutions consolidated a dual understanding of European identity, encapsulated in the motto "United in diversity." Today, European identity is formulated both as a space to celebrate European interconnectedness and a framework for dialogue and understanding among Europe's diverse cultures. Culture remains the core medium through which these two dimensions are articulated and legitimised.

Regarding the second point of the research (*Does one element of the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity prevail in ECoCs' communications?*), the theoretical and methodological framework for analysing the communications of Eleusis, Kaunas, Veszprém and Esch-sur-Alzette was developed. Risse's Constructivist Theory provided the theoretical grounding by conceptualising identity as multiple, fluid and context-dependent, shaped by social interaction and discursive cues. MMDA was applied to the BBs and WSs to examine the ECoCs' communications regarding European identity. The language, visual and audio-visual modes of communication were analysed to produce the most generalisable results and to ensure a comprehensive examination, capturing explicit statements and implicit symbolic constructions.

The analysis illustrated that both the elements (European interconnectedness and dialogue between European diversities) of the EU institutions' characterisation of European identity are present in the ECoCs' communications. The BBs' communication tends to highlight the European interconnectedness more explicitly. Their language frequently stresses common European challenges, shared aspirations and the importance of acting together as a united cultural actor. European territory is often invoked as a cohesive space, and participation from across MSs is framed as a collective necessity. Even when cities emphasise their uniqueness, they do so within a broader European frame, presenting themselves as nodes in a shared network. At the same time, the BBs do not disregard diversity. The recognition of specific local histories, traditions and cultural particularities is considered the basis for entering into exchange with other European cultures. Thus, interconnectedness (*Unity*) is prioritised, but not at the expense of dialogue between diverse European cultures (*Diversity*).

By contrast, the WSs tend to provide a more visible and immediate space for dialogue among European diverse cultures. Their language, interactive features and audio-visual content emphasise participation, inclusion and the centrality of local citizens. The city is placed at the heart of the narrative, and its distinct identity becomes the starting point for engaging with other

European cultures. Social media materials in local languages, interactive "Join us" or "Share your story" features, and the visual focus on local events reinforce the idea of identity as grounded in everyday experiences and local contexts. Nevertheless, the WSs simultaneously highlight the aspiration to engage the broadest possible European audience, presenting the ECoC year as an opportunity to foster new and historic interconnectedness and shared belonging. In this sense, although *Diversity* appears more prominent in the WSs, *Unity* remains embedded in the broader communicative strategy.

The analysis highlights that these two elements do not operate in opposition; rather, one supports the other. The emphasis on interconnectedness in the BBs establishes the structural and symbolic conditions for dialogue, while the spaces focused on dialogue promoted by the WSs give substance and legitimacy to claims of European unity. Consequently, the ECoC programme's reception and implementation of both *Unity* and *Diversity* demonstrate clear alignment with the EU's dual characterisation of European identity, balancing the two dimensions according to communicative context and audience rather than privileging one exclusively.

Moreover, concerning the third and fourth points (*Should the EU institutions foster one of the two elements? Is promoting only one element counterproductive?*), the emphasis on both elements suggests that privileging one over the other would risk sidelining part of the people's sentiments of belonging, undermining the objective of fostering European identity and becoming counterproductive. Overemphasising *Unity* could reproduce the homogenising tendencies criticised in earlier decades and alienate those who perceive their national or regional identity as threatened. In particular, the analysis of the BBs and the WSs revealed a marked difficulty for the ECoCs in portraying Europe as a unified, cohesive territorial entity, alongside a clear preference for maintaining linguistic and conceptual boundaries between the city or region, the nation and Europe. This suggests that territoriality remains a firmly rooted domain of MSs. As such, promoting European identity solely through the lens of European interconnectedness risks intensifying feelings of discontent or alienation. Conversely, focusing solely on *Diversity* could fragment the narrative and weaken the sense of shared belonging necessary for sustaining the European project. The strength of the current EU characterisation lies precisely in its duality. The ECoCs' digital communications illustrate that European identity can be constructed as a dynamic interaction between shared frameworks and local specificities. The two dimensions are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

A final key finding is the opportunity the programme offers to create new and contemporary connections among European cultures. These new connections are distinct from

the selection of high cultural heritage and associated values defining European identity prior to the 1990s. Instead, the ECoCs' events become a framework for creating new interconnectedness, which is constructed bottom-up by the city and the participating audience. This finding underscores the importance of European identity as a space for celebrating European connections.

Accordingly, three main conclusions can be extrapolated from this analysis. First, today, EU institutions narrate European identity, following the "United in diversity" motto, as a space to celebrate shared European connections and a framework for dialogue and knowledge exchange among Europe's diverse cultures. Second, the ECoC programme understands and communicates both the elements narrated by the EU institutions. Thereby, privileging one element over the other would be counterproductive. Third, the ECoC programme is a space for the creation of new interconnectedness. The ECoC initiative thus operates as a practical embodiment of the "United in diversity" principle, translating an abstract institutional narrative into concrete cultural practices and digital communications. By doing so, it contributes to shaping European identity not as a fixed or homogeneous entity, but as an evolving, culturally grounded and context-sensitive process of belonging.

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