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## EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE PLOVDIV 2019: EFFECTS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the impacts of hosting the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) by the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv in 2019 through the lens of the local community. Based on a survey conducted in 2021 with 444 residents, the perceived effects of the initiative were discussed in four domains: (1) Cultural, (2) Economic, (3) Social, and (4) Urban environment and atmosphere. Descriptive statistics techniques and analysis of variance were applied to interpret the data and outline the differences in the perceptions affected by respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. The findings indicate that in general, the ECOC impacts are perceived rather positively, although the locals are hesitant if benefits outweigh the costs incurred. None of the impacts is perceived as high by the survey participants, with mean values of agreement hardly reaching four on a 5-grade scale. The most recognized positive effects refer to the city's cultural life and the opportunities for local artists to perform; next come benefits for tourism development and promotion along with improvements in urban environment and infrastructure resulting from the ECOC implementation. Less clearly perceived are negative effects such as the price rise and the preference given to tourists over the locals. Significant differences in perceptions are determined by respondents' education, personal involvement in the ECOC organization, age, gender, and sphere of professional activity. However, such differences are found in roughly half of all 22 statements under study, meaning that certain perceptions depend on the socio-demographic profile while others do not.

**Keywords:** European Capital of Culture; impacts assessment; residents' perceptions; Plovdiv (Bulgaria)

### 1. Introduction

In terms of sustainable development, the local population is a key stakeholder whose perceptions of the impacts of any initiative in the field of culture and/or tourism are important to study and take into consideration (Andriotis, 2000; Baltaci & Cevirgen, 2020; Brankov et al., 2015; Chen & Chen, 2010; Cholakova & Dogramadjieva, 2019; Dogramadjieva, 2002, 2003; Grmuša et al., 2020; Murphy, 1983; Vodenska, 2001, 2006). This is particularly valid with the reference to the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) initiative that has been developed across Europe for more than 35 years affecting in various ways local communities in different host cities (Bursiene et al., 2018; Palmer & Richards, 2009; Turşie & Perrin, 2020). In general, hosting

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the ECOC initiative poses high expectations for positive impacts on local development, both in the field of culture and economy, although these expectations are not always met (Fox et al., 2020). Still, the ECOC impacts may reach beyond the predetermined goals (Draghici et al., 2015), with the boost of tourism being a common though often unintentional result of it (European Commission, n.d.).

The role of the local community in the initiative implementation is complex and so are their perceptions of various ECOC effects. On the one hand, residents' support is vital to the initiative's attainment. Then again, residents are those who live with both the positive and negative ECOC impacts in either a shorter or longer run (Remoaldo et al., 2016). They might be active participants as well as indirect beneficiaries of major cultural events (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2015; van der Steen & Richards, 2021), but at the same time, they are subject to different sorts of pressure, including tourist pressure (Farmaki et al., 2019).

Although the topic of ECOC impact assessment has been highly exploited in academic literature (Draghici et al., 2015; Falk & Hagsten, 2017; Garcia & Cox, 2014; Garcia et al., 2010; Gomes & Librero-Cano, 2018; Herrero et al., 2006; Izlakar & Artič, 2010; Liu, 2019; Nosková, 2016; Palmer, 2004; Remoaldo et al., 2016; Richards, 2008; Richards & Rotariu, 2011; Tsagkaridis et al., 2021; Turşie & Perrin, 2020; Vujičić et al., 2023; Žilič Fišer & Kožuh, 2019), studies on residents' perceptions of the impacts are relatively rare and reveal no consistent results. The focus is placed mainly on the balance of costs-benefits (Dragičević et al., 2015; Farmaki et al., 2019; van der Steen & Richards, 2021) and community attachment (van der Steen & Richards, 2021). The role of the locals as participants in the events or in the ECOC organization is usually neglected, with few exceptions (Kővári & Raffay-Danyi, 2022; Santos et al., 2015).

Bulgaria has recently taken part in the ECOC initiative, with the city of Plovdiv being the first one chosen to host it in 2019. Hosting the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 was broadly expected to help establishing the city as a cultural tourism destination of international significance (Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, 2014), but the ex-post effects have almost not been subjected to study. A single publication (Tilov, 2019) scarcely touches some potential ECOC impacts on cultural development and foreign investments as perceived by residents and tourists, with missing distinction between the two target groups and no clear results on the topic.

This paper deals with a wide range of ECOC Plovdiv 2019 impacts as seen by the locals in a questionnaire survey conducted in 2021. It is based on the assumption that to study how the residents are affected by the initiative implementation, it is best to ask them directly. The paper aims to examine how various ECOC impacts are perceived by the local community of Plovdiv. The study seeks to answer three research questions (RQ):

- RQ 1: Does the local community perceive overall effects of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 rather positively or rather negatively?
- RQ 2: How definite are residents' perceptions of various impacts under study?
- RQ 3: Do identified perceptions differ significantly based on respondents' profile; which impacts are differently perceived and by which social groups?

In addition, the paper provides a brief literature review of studies dedicated to local communities' perceptions of ECOC impacts regarding different host destinations around Europe, followed by a presentation of the methods used in this study, analysis of the results, discussion, and conclusion. Our work completes the knowledge base on the topic by bringing new insights from the specific case of ECOC Plovdiv 2019, Bulgaria and widening the ground

for a comparison with other case studies of ECOC host cities, partly confirming and partly questioning previous study results. Besides being of academic interest, it could be also beneficial to practical tourism planning and management that inevitably needs to respect residents' perceptions of either positive or negative effects of any significant initiative at a destination.

## 2. Literature review

ECOC effects as perceived by the local community have been studied in various aspects in different host cities. Some authors base their research on the social exchange theory, according to which the residents will support the initiative if perceived benefits prevail over the costs (Dragičević et al., 2015; Farmaki et al., 2019; van der Steen & Richards, 2021). Though using different research approaches, Dragičević et al. (2015) and Farmaki et al. (2019) identified the predomination of positive assessments of the ECOC initiative in the host cities under study. In the survey-based case study of ECOC Maribor 2012 (Dragičević et al., 2015), most positively perceived were the ECOC effects concerning the promotion and the enrichment of cultural life in the city, while the locals did not perceive any negative impacts of the initiative to a significant degree. The qualitative study of ECOC Paphos 2017 based on semi-structured interviews with residents revealed that the involvement in the tourism sector was one of the main variables shaping residents' perceptions (Farmaki et al., 2019). Four groups were outlined within the local community: (1) the engagers who had positive perceptions of ECOC and were directly involved in tourism, (2) the pragmatists who were directly involved in tourism but had negative perceptions of ECOC, (3) the adherents who were not directly involved in tourism yet believed ECOC would make a positive contribution to Paphos, and (4) the ambivalents who had no direct involvement in tourism, but had negative perceptions of the ECOC initiative and its potential contribution. Regarding the case of ECOC Valletta 2018, van der Steen and Richards (2021) found that more supportive to the initiative were those residents who expected more benefits. In addition, the authors found that residents who often attended cultural events were more positive to the ECOC, regardless the perceived costs.

The perceptions of the local community in regard to hosting the ECOC project have also been studied focusing on the city image of Novi Sad, Serbia (Kovačić et al., 2021). The study was undertaken four years prior to the title year (2022). The results revealed that even before the initiative implementation, the city appealed to the locals as a pleasant place to live. However, further ECOC related improvements and investments were expected in the local economy, including the tourism development.

A study concerning the effects of the ECOC Guimarães 2012 (Remoaldo et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2015) adopted the longitudinal study approach: two surveys of residents were carried out—one before the hosting year (in 2011) and one after the hosting year (in 2013). The study results revealed that the local population's attitudes before the hosting year were more positive than the year after (Remoaldo et al., 2016). Besides, the research team found a relationship between the respondents' participation and their perceptions regarding the attributes of the city's identity grouped in three aspects: Sports dimension, Performances, and Local arts (Santos et al., 2015).

Liu (2019) focused on Liverpool hosting the ECOC in 2008 and brought insights to the implementation of the initiative in the aspect of the city's cultural and urban regeneration. A survey with residents was conducted in 2015, asking the respondents to express their level of

agreement with statements concerning the ECOC effects and the image of Liverpool based on a 5-point Likert scale. The majority of respondents agreed that the initiative brought more positive impression of Liverpool for people outside the city. The author identified so many positive outcomes of the implementation of the ECOC Liverpool 2008 that he proposed a model for achieving sustainability through legacy planning based on the Liverpool experience.

In contrast, another study based on interviews regarding the effects of the ECOC Marseille-Provence 2013 portrayed mostly negative attitudes to the initiative (Giovanangeli, 2015). Residents showed feelings of common frustration and disappointment in the program and the criteria to select participating artists. This led to the implementation of a project parallel to the ECOC during the hosting year with a cultural program comprising events that had dropped out of the ECOC program.

Overall, studies on residents' perceptions of the ECOC initiative and its impacts in host destinations focus on different aspects of perceived effects, employ various methodological approaches and instruments, and come upon different, sometimes contradicting results. Therefore, it is important to deal with each specific case of hosting the ECOC initiative in order to complete the empirical data base, find relevant explanations to the specific reactions identified, and outline implications of potential benefit to various stakeholders—local planners, cultural institutions, tourism businesses, and communities.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Study participants

To assess perceptions and attitudes of the local community regarding the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 impacts, a survey of 444 residents of more than 18 years of age was conducted at the end of 2021. Socio-demographic characteristics of the survey participants are displayed in Table 1. The data indicate a diverse sample structure covering different groups by gender, age, education, financial dependency on tourism, sphere of professional activity, and personal involvement in the ECOC initiative. Of higher relative weight in the sample are females (59%), people in active working age between 26 and 60 years (79.2%), those with higher education (67%), those whose income is not directly dependent on tourism (75.1%), as well as the respondents who did not participate in the ECOC organization (61.1%). However, the share of those involved in the ECOC organization is relatively high (38.9%), which might influence their perceptions and overall study results.

**Table 1.** The study sample

Socio-demographic characteristics	Categories	Number of valid cases	Share of valid cases (%)
Gender	Male	175	39.4
	Female	263	59.2
Age group	18–25	50	11.3
	26–40	163	36.8
	41–60	188	42.4
	60+	42	9.5
	Primary	5	1.1
Education	Secondary	139	31.5
	Higher	297	67.3

**Table 1.** *Continued*

Socio-demographic characteristics	Categories	Number of valid cases	Share of valid cases (%)
Financial dependency on tourism	Yes	105	24.9
	No	316	75.1
Sphere of professional activity	Tourism business	36	8.1
	Trade & Services	42	9.5
	Industry	124	28.1
	Education & Culture	134	30.3
	Transport	29	6.6
Personal involvement in ECOC	Other	77	17.4
	Yes	172	38.9
	No	270	61.1

### 3.2. Instrument

The survey form consisted of three sections. The first section contained six close-ended questions. One of them sought to reveal respondents' general attitude toward tourism development in Plovdiv and the ECOC initiative (on a 5-grade scale). Five other questions aimed to identify perceived benefits of the ECOC implementation in Plovdiv by checking boxes of predefined answers, with some of them providing additional options for free comments. The second section measured the respondents' level of agreement with 22 statements regarding various impacts of ECOC Plovdiv 2019 using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 applied to *completely disagree*, 3 applied to *neutral*, and 5 applied to *completely agree*. The final section comprised questions about the respondents' socio-demographic profile.

Since the paper deals with the level of agreement with all 22 statements in the second section of the questionnaire, more clarification on their elaboration is needed. These statements itemize either positive or negative connotations referring to four domains: (1) Cultural—five statements, (2) Economic—seven statements, (3) Social—four statements, and (4) Urban environment and atmosphere—five statements. One statement refers to the overall assessment of ECOC impacts and, therefore, does not belong to any domain. The statements were developed specifically for the present study taking in consideration relevant groups of impacts as identified in a general tourism development context (Dogramadjieva, 2003; Marinov & Vodenska, 1995; Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Vodenska, 2001, 2006; Vodenska & Mihalkova, 1998), as well as particular ECOC related study (Garcia et al., 2010) where impacts are grouped into economic, social, and cultural dimensions. The last domain—urban environment and atmosphere—was outlined based on authors' personal observations of the specific case of ECOC Plovdiv 2019. The case study of ECOC Maribor 2012 (Dragičević et al., 2015), though quite similar in certain statements, was not considered in the process of questionnaire development since it has become known to the authors at a later stage during the article preparation. However, results allowing direct comparison of impacts as perceived by the locals are referred to in the discussion of our findings.

### 3.3. Procedure

The survey was completed predominantly online using the Lime Survey tool. The sample of 302 online respondents was supplemented by 142 manually filled in printed copies of the survey. Thus, the total sample size reached 444 valid respondents—a considerably higher

number compared to other studies in the field (Dragičević et al., 2015; Farmaki et al., 2019; van der Steen & Richards, 2021). The responses were gathered during a time frame of three months using the non-probability snowball sampling technique (Saunders et al., 2007). An initial group of 56 respondents were asked to spread the survey to as many adult residents of Plovdiv as possible. This method of disseminating the survey was preferred due to the COVID-19-related restrictions by the time of conducting the research.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The survey data were processed using the SPSS software. The reliability of scales used for the positive and negative statements in the study were measured by calculating Cronbach's Alpha. Test results for the 15 positive statements revealed  $\alpha = .94$ , i.e., acceptable scale reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). For the seven negative statements,  $\alpha = .62$  indicated problematic scale reliability, which was also affected by the small number of items in the group. Therefore, study findings regarding negative perceptions should be treated with caution. Those regarding the wide range of positive perceptions, however, are considered reliable.

Means and frequencies were put under descriptive analysis to uncover the extent to which participants agree with all the statements, i.e., how they perceive different impacts under study. In addition, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to test differences in respondents' perceptions by socio-demographic groups to find if their opinions were determined by certain socio-demographic characteristics. *F*-test results for all statements are presented in a Table 3. Only significant differences in perceptions are revealed in Figures 1 and 2.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Local community perceptions of the ECOC impacts

Results indicate a positive overall assessment of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 impacts (3.64) with 61% of respondents rather or completely agreeing that positives of hosting the initiative outweigh negatives. However, 22% are undecided on the question while 17% state different level of disagreement, signaling that a considerable part of the community is not positively affected by the initiative implementation (Table 2).

The highest appreciated are cultural ECOC impacts, with all the positive statements in the cultural domain being supported by 59% to 80% of respondents. The contribution of the initiative is mostly seen in the enrichment of cultural life (4.03) and the opportunities provided for local artists to perform (4.01). In addition, residents considerably agree that the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 has boosted cultural exchange, thus "opening" the city to the world (3.81), and rather agree that the initiative has raised their personal interest in visiting cultural events (3.62) and heritage attractions (3.56).

Perceptions towards economic ECOC impacts are ambiguous and more hesitant. Respondents are predominantly positive in regard to the ECOC contribution to local tourism development (3.90) and marketing of Plovdiv as a tourist destination (3.94). On the other hand, almost half of them feel the initiative has affected the price rise in the city (3.43). Locals are slightly positive and quite unsure with the reference to the ECOC initiative rising external investments (3.49) and opening new job opportunities (3.14). In general, they considerably doubt whether the economic balance of ECOC benefits and costs is in favor of benefits (2.96). Most respondents disagree that hosting the initiative has brought no changes to the city's economic development (2.58), however they are not enthusiastic about the positive outcomes.

**Table 2.** Level of agreement with provided statements in different domains—means and frequencies

Statement number	Statements by domains	Means	Standard deviation	Share of respondents (%)				
				Completely disagree	Rather disagree	Neutral	Rather agree	Completely agree
1	For me personally, positives of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 implementation outweigh negatives	3.64	1.19	7	10	22	34	27
<i>Cultural domain (5)</i>								
2	ECOC has boosted the enrichment of cultural life	4.03	1.02	4	6	10	45	35
3	ECOC has provided good opportunities for local artist	4.01	0.96	3	5	16	42	34
4	ECOC has boosted cultural exchange and contributed to 'opening' the city to the world	3.81	1.08	4	9	18	40	29
5	ECOC has risen my personal interest in cultural events	3.62	1.15	7	10	23	36	24
6	ECOC has risen my personal interest in local heritage attractions	3.56	1.19	8	11	22	36	23
<i>Economic domain (7)</i>								
7	ECOC has helped promote the city as a tourist destination	3.94	1.12	4	10	12	36	38
8	ECOC has contributed to tourism development in Plovdiv	3.90	1.08	5	8	11	44	32
9	ECOC has boosted the rise of external investments	3.49	1.09	5	13	30	33	19
10	ECOC has contributed to general price rise in the city	3.43	1.08	4	14	35	28	19
11	ECOC has boosted the opening of new job opportunities	3.14	1.10	8	19	35	27	11
12	Benefits from the ECOC to the city justify the costs	2.96	1.20	15	18	34	22	11
13	Hosting the ECOC has brought no change to the city's economy	2.58	1.17	21	29	28	15	7
<i>Social domain (4)</i>								
14	My emotional attachment to the community of Plovdiv grew stronger during the ECOC Plovdiv 2019	3.31	1.12	8	13	33	32	14
15	ECOC has not affected my everyday life in any way	3.31	1.33	12	18	21	25	24
16	ECOC Plovdiv 2019 was targeted more to the tourists than to the locals	3.30	1.14	6	21	26	32	15
17	The ECOC cultural events were inaccessible to me	2.27	1.16	31	31	24	8	6
<i>Urban environment and atmosphere (5)</i>								
18	ECOC Plovdiv 2019 triggered improvements in infrastructure and urban environment	3.91	1.11	4	10	11	41	34
19	I enjoyed the fact that the city was full of people during the ECOC Plovdiv 2019	3.90	1.12	5	8	17	34	36
20	ECOC Plovdiv 2019 has contributed to making life in the city more diverse and interesting	3.77	1.12	6	10	14	43	27
21	With the end of 2019 the feeling that Plovdiv was at the heart of events also ended	3.08	1.21	10	26	23	27	14
22	ECOC Plovdiv 2019 led to overcrowding of the city	3.06	1.26	10	29	21	23	17

Diverse perceptions are found toward social ECOC impacts, except for the cultural events that are clearly not considered inaccessible to locals (2.27). Respondents are highly split and quite undecided on whether the ECOC initiative has affected their everyday life and their emotional attachment to the Plovdiv community, as well as if a preference was given to tourists over the locals. Still, the three statements are either “rather” or “strongly” supported by almost half of the respondents, suggesting that the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 implementation has risen the community attachment (3.31), although it was targeted mostly to tourists (3.30) and did not considerably affect locals’ routine (3.31).

Fairly highly appreciated are ECOC impacts on urban environment and atmosphere, with 70–75% of all respondents noting improvements in urban infrastructure (3.91) together with vibrant atmosphere since the city was full of people (3.90) and life was more interesting during the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 (3.77). The local community is highly split in terms of whether the ECOC has resulted in overcrowding the city (40% agree vs. 39% disagree) and whether the lively atmosphere was only present during the title year (41% agree vs. 36% disagree). Such a result indicates that although both overcrowding and temporary ECOC effects are considered within the local community, none of them is consistently perceived as a negative outcome of the initiative implementation.

#### *4.2. Differences in perceptions based on the respondents’ socio-demographic profile*

Analysis of variance reveals no significant differences in respondents’ opinions based on their socio-demographic characteristics regarding ten out of twenty-two statements, including the overall assessment that positives of hosting the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 outweigh negatives (Table 3). However, significant variations in perceptions are found with the reference to 12 statements indicating that respondents’ profile does matter in shaping their views in certain aspects (Table 3, Figure 1 and 2).

All socio-demographic characteristics under study except for the financial dependency on tourism show statistical importance, though for a limited number of statements (Table 3). Significant differences are mostly based on education (six statements—Number 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 22) and personal involvement in the organization of ECOC events (four statements—Number 9, 11, 12, 14). As a factor of determination, next comes age (three statements—Number 4, 14, 17) followed by gender and sphere of professional activity (two statements each—Number 11 and 19, and 9 and 15 respectively).

The strongest influenced by respondents’ profile are perceptions in the economic domain—Significant differences are found in five out of seven statements (Table 3). Most differences refer to the role of ECOC in opening new job opportunities (based on gender, education, and personal involvement in the initiative) and boosting external investments (based on education, professional activity, and personal involvement). It is worth noting that new job opportunities are more appreciated by males than females (3.33 vs. 3.03) and, logically, by respondents who were personally involved in the initiative implementation (3.36 vs. 2.98). Also, the latter subgroup stronger agrees that economic benefits from ECOC Plovdiv 2019 justify the costs incurred, although the level of agreement is low (3.10 vs. 2.87).

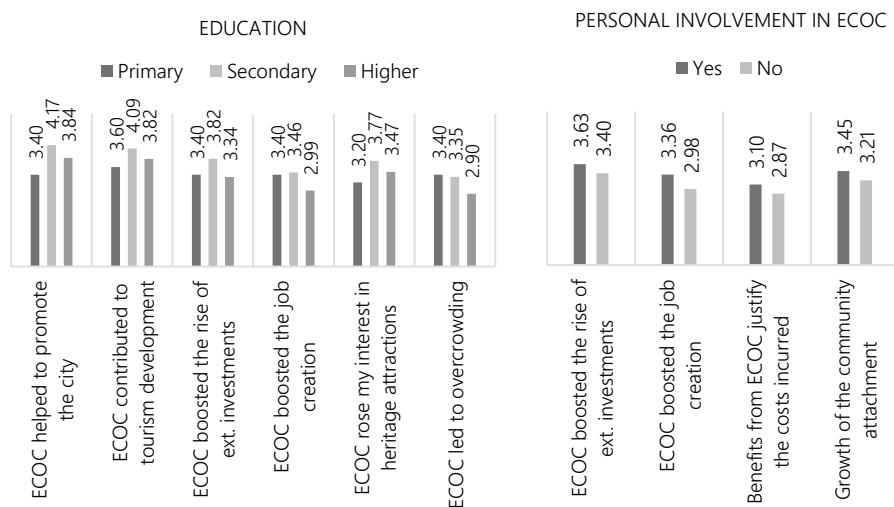


**Table 3.** Tested variances in the level of agreement based on the respondents' socio-demographic profile

Statement Number	Statements	F-test results					
		Gender	Age group	Level of education	Sphere of professional activity	Dependency on tourism	Personal involvement in ECOC
1	Overall positives of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 outweigh negatives	0.55	1.47	0.46	0.74	0.43	0.71
2	ECOC has boosted the enrichment of cultural life in the city	0.57	0.78	0.48	0.64	0.08	1.84
3	ECOC provided good opportunities for local artists to perform	0.64	0.43	0.81	0.44	0.42	0.03
4	ECOC has boosted cultural exchange	0.75	2.92*	2.45	0.57	0.19	0.02
5	ECOC has risen my personal interest in cultural events in the city	0.01	0.56	1.63	1.27	2.51	0.10
6	ECOC has risen my personal interest in local heritage attractions	0.11	0.88	3.10*	0.78	0.36	0.38
7	ECOC has helped to promote the city	0.04	0.00	4.81**	0.67	0.26	2.27
8	ECOC has contributed to tourism development in Plovdiv	0.73	0.46	3.16*	1.37	0.07	2.81
9	ECOC has boosted the rise of external investments in the city	3.78	0.37	9.45***	2.83*	0.31	5.00*
10	ECOC has contributed to general price rise in the city	0.32	0.44	0.15	0.88	0.35	0.02
11	ECOC has boosted the opening of new job opportunities in the city	7.65**	1.58	8.94***	1.14	1.75	12.48***
12	Benefits from ECOC Plovdiv 2019 to the city justify the costs incurred	1.85	1.28	2.00	0.23	0.38	4.00*
13	Hosting ECOC has brought no change to the city's economy	0.01	0.85	0.36	1.95	2.17	1.12
14	My emotional attachment to the community grew during ECOC	2.25	3.06*	2.69	1.09	0.95	4.96*
15	ECOC has not affected my everyday life in any way	0.03	0.81	1.79	3.50**	0.91	0.01
16	ECOC was targeted more to the tourists than to the locals	0.96	1.43	2.07	2.10	0.65	0.68
17	The ECOC cultural events were inaccessible to me	3.08	4.38**	1.28	0.49	2.92	1.21
18	ECOC triggered improvements in the urban infrastructure	0.23	0.62	2.95	0.45	3.43	0.45
19	I enjoyed the fact that the city was full of people during ECOC	5.40*	0.88	1.67	0.28	1.82	0.78
20	ECOC has contributed to making life in the city diverse and interesting	0.98	1.06	0.19	0.17	0.27	0.00
21	With the end of 2019, the feeling that Plovdiv was at the heart of events also ended	0.35	1.00	0.64	1.06	0.66	0.27
22	ECOC led to overcrowding	3.10	1.26	6.27**	2.10	0.01	2.71

Note. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

Perceptions in the social domain differ depending on age, sphere of professional activity, and personal involvement with ECOC (three out of four statements). Interestingly, respondents of the 60+ age group felt more strongly attached to the local community (3.64) than younger generations, although attending ECOC events was less accessible to them (2.81). Also, emotional attachment to the community was more evident for those involved in the initiative organization (3.45 vs 3.21). The perceived ECOC influence on everyday life differs by the sphere of professional activity, with the lack of such influence being less agreed by respondents working in the tourism industry (2.72 vs. 3.31 on average).

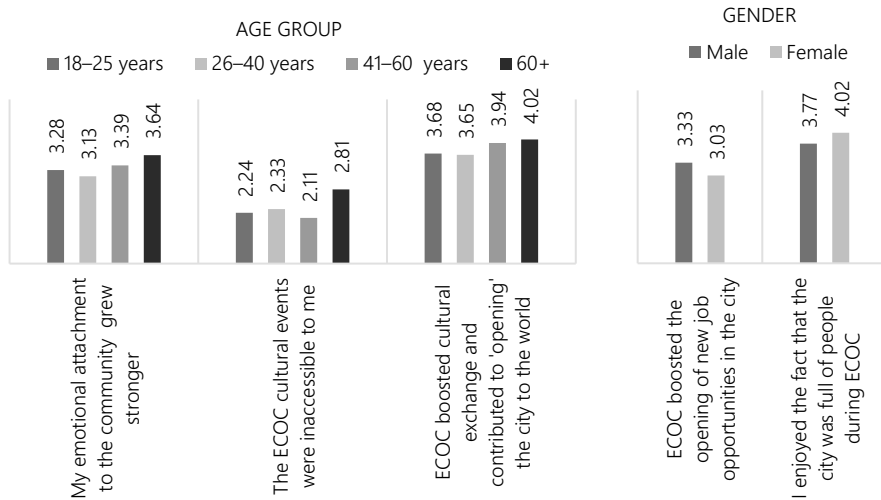


**Figure 1.** Statements with significant differences in the levels of agreement by education and personal involvement in the ECOC organization (means on a 5-grade scale).

Perceptions of cultural impacts and those regarding urban environment and atmosphere seem less affected by socio-demographic characteristics since significant differences are found in only two statements of each domain (Table 3). Somewhat surprisingly, positive ECOC influences of boosting cultural exchange and ‘opening’ the city to the world is more strongly agreed by people of higher age groups than within younger generations up to 40 years of age (Figure 2). Females enjoyed more than males the fact that the city was full of people during the initiative implementation (4.02 vs. 3.77). However, significantly different perceptions in regard to overcrowding are found only based on education, with higher educated respondents being considerably less concerned (2.90) than those with primary and secondary education (Figure 1). Education also seems to have determined the rise of personal interest in Plovdiv’s heritage attractions (though not in attending cultural events triggered by the ECOC), with people holding secondary education degree being most affected (3.77).

In sum, the study findings revealed on Figure 1 and 2 indicate that residents with secondary education perceive the role of the ECOC initiative in certain economic and cultural aspects more positively compared to the higher educated ones, whose perceptions are more restrained. Furthermore, respondents acting as ECOC organizers or volunteers perceive the ECOC contribution to the rise of external investments, community attachment, and the

creation of new job offers as well as the overall balance of ECOC benefits and costs more positively compared to the rest of the locals. Respondents of older age appreciate some social and cultural ECOC impacts higher than younger generations, although those of the 60+ group agree more than others that the ECOC events were inaccessible to them. Gender appears of limited importance affecting only perceptions regarding the creation of new job opportunities (higher agreed by males) and the lively atmosphere caused by the presence of more people in the city during the ECOC events (more highly agreed by females).



**Figure 2.** Statements with significant differences in the levels of agreement by age group and gender (means on a 5-grade scale).

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Above presented survey of perceived impacts of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 through the lens of the local population brought new insights to the topic that is far from well-studied, especially in the Bulgarian context. Findings allow for outlining certain similarities and differences compared to other publications found in the literature.

Our study reveals that the overall assessment of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 impacts is positive, though not euphoric. Various impacts under study are moderately perceived by the local population of Plovdiv, with relatively high shares of neutral answers and means ranging between 2.5 and 4.0 on a 5-point scale. These results significantly deviate from the extremely positive assessments of the ECOC Liverpool 2008 drawn by Liu (2019), as well as the deep disappointment of the ECOC Marseille-Provence 2013 presented by Giovanangeli (2015).

More similarities are found with the reference to Dragičević et al. (2015) and Farmaki et al. (2019) who also identify prevailing positive perceptions regarding the ECOC implementation in Maribor 2012 and Paphos 2017. However, both in Plovdiv and Paphos, respondents were hesitant if the ECOC benefits justified the costs and part of them felt neglected since the initiative was rather targeted to tourists. On the other hand, while events during the ECOC Paphos 2017 were inaccessible to the locals (Farmaki et al., 2019), this was not the case with the ECOC Plovdiv 2019.

In our study, the strongest positive perceptions are found in the cultural domain followed by the economic domain and the urban environment and atmosphere domain, while those in the social domain are more restrained. Particularly, highly appreciated are the ECOC impacts on enriching cultural life in Plovdiv and providing good opportunities for local artists to perform, the ECOC role in tourism development and marketing of the city, as well as the ECOC triggered improvements in urban environment and having more people in the city during the initiative implementation. Less clearly perceived are negative effects such as the price rise, overcrowding, and the preference given to tourists over the locals. In this regard, interesting parallels with the study of ECOC Maribor 2012 (Dragičević et al., 2015) can be drawn since it applies a similar methodology. In both cases, the ECOC role in enriching cultural life, promoting the city, and making life more interesting is highly acknowledged while other positive effects, such as enhanced community attachment and new job opportunities, are lower perceived. A striking difference refers to the ECOC triggered improvements in urban infrastructure that are fairly appreciated in Plovdiv, but rather unrecognized in Maribor—probably because of the generally poorer condition of infrastructure in Bulgaria, where improvements in the urban environment are more clearly related to the ECOC implementation. The negative ECOC impacts associated with rising prices and overcrowding do not seem an issue for the participants in both studies. Yet, they are more strongly perceived by the residents of Plovdiv compared to the residents of Maribor, which might be due to different objective circumstances as well as to different mentality.

As for the differences in perceptions based on respondents' socio-demographic profile, both expected and unexpected results could be outlined. First, our findings reveal that respondents with higher education perceive some economic and cultural ECOC effects in a more balanced way, while those with secondary education claim they were more strongly affected. Such a result could be explained by generally stronger critical opinions expressed by higher educated people.

Second, respondents acting as ECOC organizers or volunteers perceive some economic and social impacts more positively compared to the rest of the locals. However, significant differences in perceptions based on this criterion are found only with the reference to four out of 22 statements, specifically regarding the boost of external investments, opening new jobs, stronger community attachment, and the overall assessment that the ECOC benefits justify the costs. It should be stressed that even among the respondents who were personally involved in the ECOC organization, the level of agreement with above-mentioned four statements is relatively low, varying from 3.10 to 3.63 on a 5-point scale. Such a result reveals quite restrained perceptions of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019 positive impacts even among those who should be expected to gain more benefits of the initiative implementation.

Another somewhat surprising result is that respondents of older age groups seem to appreciate certain social and cultural ECOC impacts higher than younger generations, especially when it comes to "opening" the city to the world and strengthening community attachment. Last but not least, perceived ECOC impacts are affected by gender and sphere of professional activity in limited aspects, while no significant differences in perceptions are found based on financial dependency on tourism. The latter contradicts to the findings of Farmaki et al. (2019) regarding ECOC Paphos 2017 where tourism involvement is considered the main variable affecting residents' perceptions. These findings need further attention in parallel to results from other surveys as well as relevant explanations considering the local context, which are to be provided by future research.

Limitations of the study refer mainly to the non-probability sampling applied, the problematic scale reliability regarding negative statements, and the scope of the survey dealing with one case only—that of the ECOC Plovdiv 2019, Bulgaria. Relatively slight differences in perceptions depending on respondents' personal involvement in the ECOC organization do not suggest that the 39% survey participants involved in ECOC is a key limitation of the study, as we initially anticipated. Yet, if the share of study participants involved in ECOC had been smaller, the results would have revealed even more restrained perceptions of Plovdiv residents on ECOC impacts. Our results may not be directly extendible to other cities hosting the ECOC initiative. Still, they bring new information on a topic that has been barely studied in the country and rarely studied abroad using large enough samples. Thus, the survey contributes to completing the international knowledge data base and gaining insights to the intricate nature of community perceptions, particularly regarding impacts of large-scale cultural initiatives.

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