

THE EVOLUTION OF THE POPULATION'S INTEREST FOR THE TIMIȘOARA EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2023 PROGRAM

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Abstract: *Timișoara has won in 2016 the title of European Capital of Culture for 2021 (ECC), but due to pandemic reasons, the title was postponed for 2023. There were made several sociological researches, before and after decision, concerning the public interest for this program. In this paper we make a comparative analysis on the evolution of the population's interest for this program during a decade. For this we have used the databases from the studies made in 2013, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2023. The main conclusion is that the population's interest has a strong connection with the public policy concerning this program. So, if at the beginning, the involving of the public administration and the population support was very high, after obtaining the title, the problems from the inside management of the program have generated a significant decrease of the public support. The slight shift in perspective occurred right before 2023, year in which the situation was partially solved due to the rising interest of both the locals and tourists towards the various cultural events. Regardless of the current tendencies, we still have to wait until the program is finished in order to make a proper evaluation, that will be included into the next sociological research of the TmECC2023 program.*

Keywords: Timișoara European Capital of Culture 2023, population's support, public policy, cultural program, sociological research.

1. Introduction

On 16th of September 2016 Timișoara has won the title of European Capital of Culture for 2021 against stronger competitors city, such as București, Cluj-Napoca and Craiova (initially 14 candidate cities). The preparing of the candidature was a very consistent five-year approach, with an extended involvement of various cultural stakeholders (public administrations, NGOs, creators and artists). A dedicated NGO (Timisoara 2021) was created for the elaboration of the bid-book, and a consistent creative energy of the city was involved to participate, under a professional supervision of some very important foreign experts in similar projects from abroad, such as Ektor Tsatsoulis, Jiri Sulzenko, Elsa Soro, Mattijs Maussen and so on. The preparation of the application was a real success, and Timisoara obtained the title on the base of a very good structured and elaborated bid-book.

In the evolution of this process, three distinct stages can be delimited: the preparation of the application (2010-2016), the preparation of the program (2016-2020) and the reconfiguration of the process (2020-2023). Into the first stage, the preparation of the bid-book was coordinated by the "Timisoara European Capital of Culture 2021" NGO and its director Simona Neumann. During this period all the (quite limited) resources and all the creative energy was focused on the elaboration of a very consistent document with the local cultural strengths, specificities and the planning of further activities. The local administration was directly involved and a large support from the stakeholders and from community was obtained. The public interest for the program was at its highest level from the very beginning. Into the second stage, after the obtaining of the title (2016-2020) the situation has significantly changed. Due to various reasons, (including the perspective of further significant resources), the communication among stakeholders has blocked and several tensions appeared along with a transparency issue related to the evolution of the program. The focus has moved from the configuration of the contents to administration of the benefits. In 2020,

with only one year before to start, the general opinion of the public and cultural actors was that the city is not ready for the title. The political change at the Timisoara City Hall and the pandemic period has defined the third stage when the program was reconfigured and prepared to be implemented with the new approach. During this decade several sociological studies were carried out and the results reflect that the population is aware of the evolution of the program management. The fluctuations in the administration of the coordination process of TmECC 23 have been directly reflected into the public opinion and into the population interest for voluntary involving in various dedicated activities. Despite all these dysfunctionalities, Timisoara is European Capital of Culture in 2023 and the follow up analysis from next year will reflect if it was a success.

2. Methods

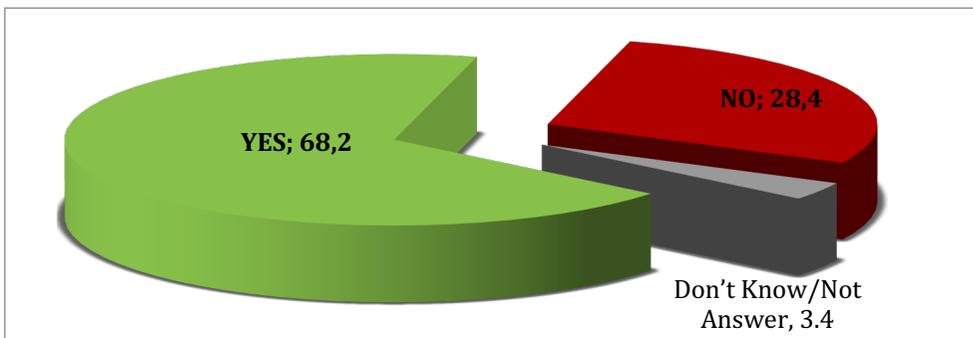
For the approaching of this topic there were used several sociological researches conducted in Timisoara in 2013, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2023. The first study in this series was made in 2013 for the “Timisoara European Capital of Culture 2021 Association”, the NGO that has prepared the bid-book, with on field questionnaires with a sample N=1064 people. Three years later, in 2016 the research was repeated with a similar approach (N=1060). In 2018 it was organized another sociological research for the evaluation of the Cultural Strategy for Timisoara municipality and the topic was again approached (N=1000). During the pandemic period another evaluation was made online and by phone, with a dedicated questionnaire (N=815). Finally, in 2023 it was accomplished the Cultural Barometer with a questionnaire that also has approached the topic of European Capital of Culture (N=1152).

Starting from these results, we are trying into the next pages to analyze the evolution of public impact of the TmECC23 preparation and program. It is not a metanalysis, but only a comparative approach with an adequate contextualization of the public interest, perception and support of this program. These aspects were included into the questionnaire with various forms, but several comparison can be made easily, at least as a level of perceptions.

3. Results

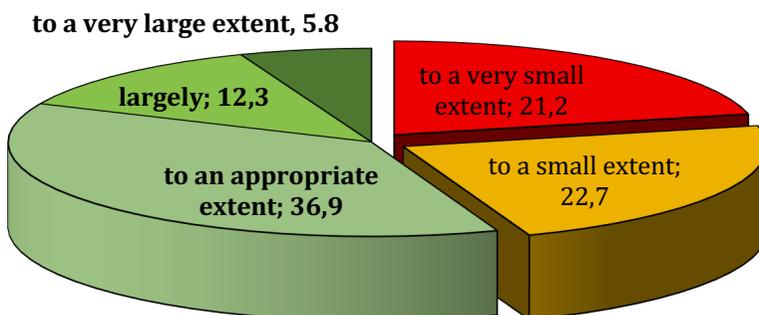
The first study, applied in 2013 was accomplished into a context when the public agenda from Timisoara has very few references to the intention of the municipality to apply for the candidature at European Capital of Culture in 2021. There was no yeat promotion about this perspective, and the public knowledge about the meaning of this program was almost zero. This first study was made also as a first sociological diagnosis of the potential of community to coagulate around a new and challenging idea. There were applied 1064 questionnaires on an interconnected quota sample (age and gender). Even without a minimal understanding of this EU competition, the general pro-Europe profile of Timisoara’s population was confirmed again by the recorded results. Thus, a direct question was related to the minimal knowledge about this intention (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Have you heard about the initiative of the Municipality of Timisoara to apply for the title of European Cultural Capital in 2021? (applied in 2013)



According with this distribution, more than two thirds from the population have heard about the program at the very beginning stage of preparation of the candidature. It is not clear how much there was social desirability into the answers, but a mostly positive perspective was quite sure. Of course, the hearing about the program and the knowledge of the content are two different things, but is important to accept that, the population from Timisoara was good connected with the idea of European Capital of Culture, several years before the time of the award. And, even it was not exploited at its maximum potential, this was actually a very important resource, as it can be seen into the next graph (Figure 2)

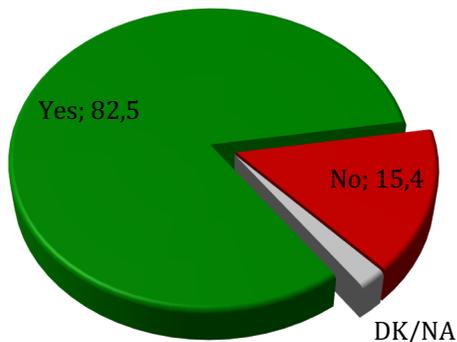
Figure 2 - Q6. Would you personally be willing to get involved in supporting this project? (applied in 2013)



Thus, more than half of Timisoara’s population has declared its availability to support the project at least at an appropriate extent. This declared voluntary support represents a very positive context for the preparing of the program and it was included as a relevant resource into the bid-book. The people who have expressed a decreased support for the program, probably chose this option into the questionnaire due to a very limited knowledge about it.

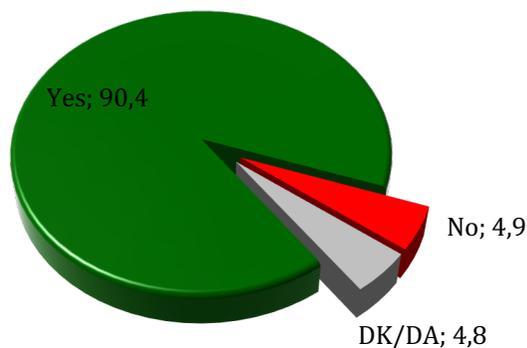
As it was expected, three years later, using a similar sampling technique, the level of awareness has increased significantly, both as information and as support for Tm ECC21 (Figure 3 and Figure 4):

Figure 3. Q7. Have you heard about Timisoara's candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture in 2021? (applied in 2016)



In less than three years (from November 2013 until June 2016) the level of public knowledge about the program has increased by almost 15%, and thus before the winning the title of ECC. Even apparently it is not a huge step, the public's involvement suffered a significant rising:

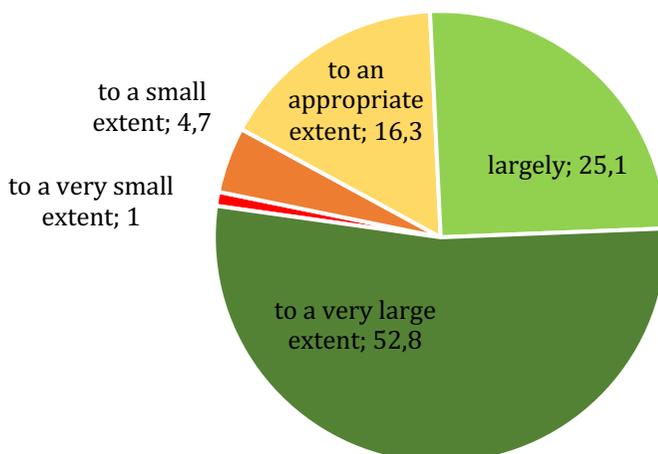
Figure 4 - Q8. Do you personally support Timisoara's candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture in 2021? (applied in 2016)



With over 90% of the population virtually available to be involved voluntarily into the organization of the ECC program, the city was very good prepared for the contest's decision. This decision came in September 2016, against all prognoses, into a very tight competition, with Bucuresti, Cluj-Napoca and Baia Mare on the final list.

The topic has become one of high interest among the locals and plenty of expectations were generated from the magical year 2021. Even if detailed knowledge of the main content of this EU cultural policy (European Capital of Culture) has remained limited, everyone symbolically associated the TmECC21 with funds, events, tourists, urban regeneration, and a general opportunity for Timisoara. The association of the Tm ECC21 title with the expected very positive chance for the city was generally accepted as a certainty (Figure 5):

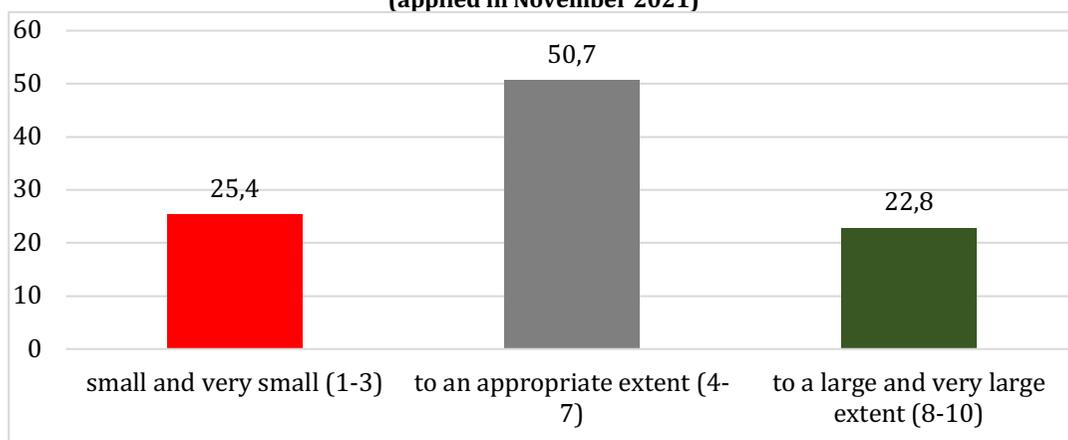
Figure 5 - Q31. To what extent do you think that obtaining the title of ECC 2021 will contribute to the development of the city of Timisoara? (applied in 2018)



According with this data, 94.2% from Timisoara’s population considered that winning the title of ECC for 2021 would have contributed to the city development, at least at an average level. Into the same time, only 1% estimate that there will don’t be any advantages. By other hand, the engagement of the population was, at least, at an optimal level, despite the asperities and the conflicts among the stakeholders.

After obtaining this title the perspective of a significant budget and profitable business has generated a lot of discussions, conflicts, tensions and lack of coordination into the administration of the program. The delaying of the expected actions and urban interventions has become more present into the public space. The Covid-19 pandemic period has postponed the program for 2023 and also has accentuated the feelings that nothing was happening. As a result, the public’s perception of the program decreased consequently (Figure 6):

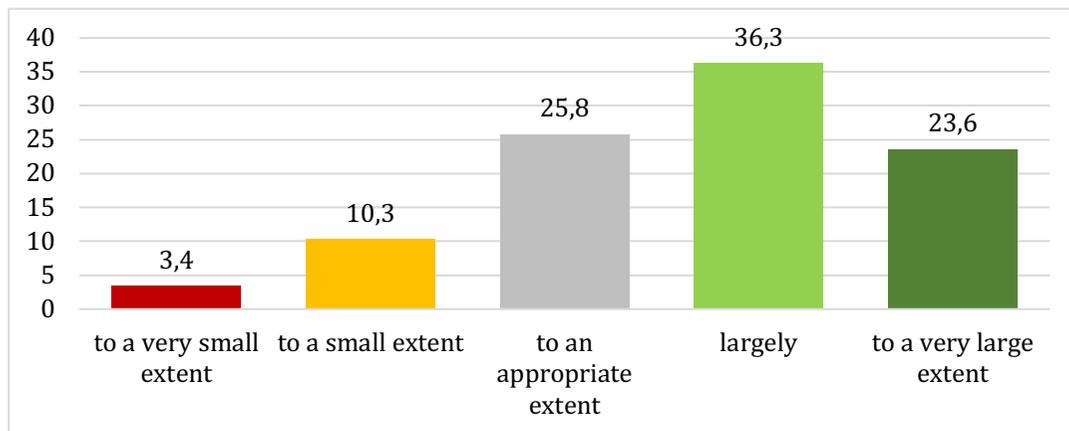
Figure 6 - Q9. From a general perspective, to what extent do you consider that Timisoara is ready to become the European Capital of Culture in 2023 (from 1 to 10, median = 6)? (applied in November 2021)



Thus, at the end of 2021, the year when the ECC title was firstly granted, more than half of Timisoara’s population believed that the city is not quite prepared for this: and of course, they do have a lot of reasons to affirm so. By the other hand, the public opinion about

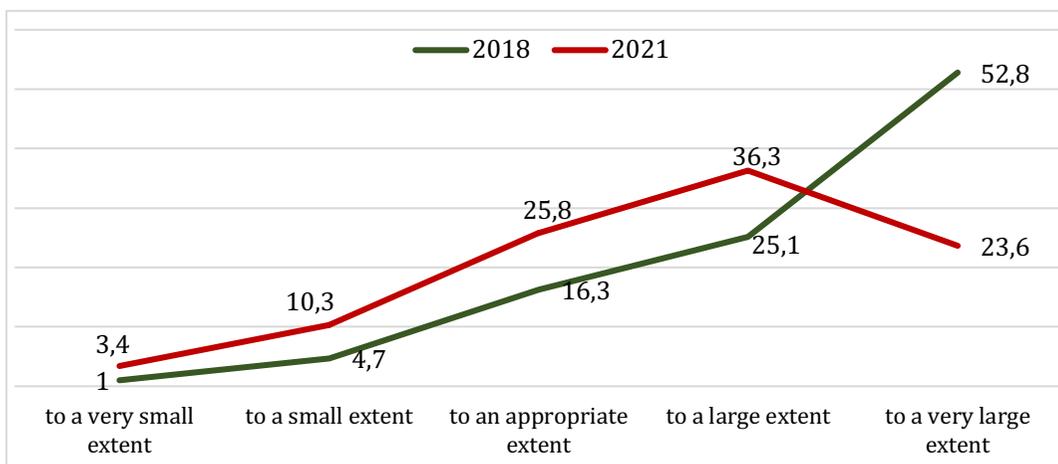
the utility of the program has also slightly decreased, but remained at a quite high level (Figure 7):

Figure 7 - Q12. To what extent do you think that the Timișoara European Capital of Culture 2023 project will help the development of the city? (applied 2021)



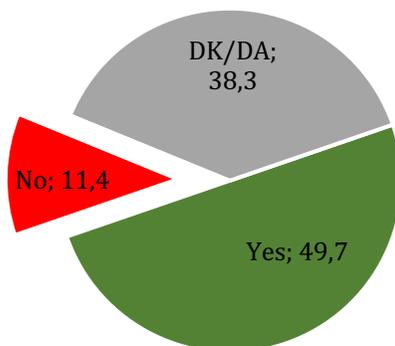
This evolution of the population’s expectation about the utility of the program, based on a several negative subjects consequently presented into the public space, has decreased in only 3 years with 11,1% in pondered values (and with 29.2% for the *Tm ECC 21/23 will help the development of the city to a very large extend*), as it can be observed into the following graph (figure 8):

Figure 8 - Q31 vs. Q12. To what extent do you think that the Timișoara European Capital of Culture 2021/3 project will help the development of the city? (2018 vs. 2021)



As a direct consequence, the interest of the population to sustain this program has recorded a similar decrease, almost half of subjects expressing their hypothetical support:

Figure 9 - Q13. Are you personally willing to support this project through volunteer activities? (applied in 2021)



First of all, following these data, it can be observed a significant increasing of the people that doesn't know (in 2021) if they will offer support for this program, comparatively with 4,8% in 2016. With other words, from 2018 until 2021 the public opinion was moved from "yes" (I will sustain the program) to "don't know/don't answer", and not to "No" (I will don't sustain the program).

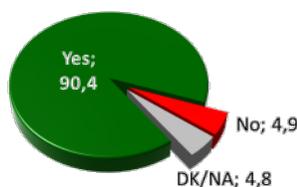
Secondly, a direct association among the public discourse about the TmECC21/23 program that was delivered by the local stakeholders, the population estimation of the preparation of the city for hosting the dedicated activities and, more important, the availability of the people to sustain these. When the general image about the managing of the program was a positive one, everything looked great. When the inside troubles appeared on the public space, the population had a direct reaction, accordingly with these:

Figure 10 – The evolution of the answers about the public support for Tm ECC 21/23 in three previous studies

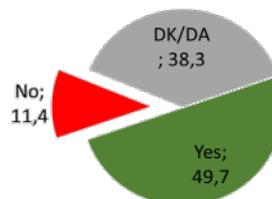
Q6. Would you personally be willing to get involved in supporting this project? (applied in 2013)



Q8. Do you personally support Timisoara's candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture in 2021? (applied in 2016)



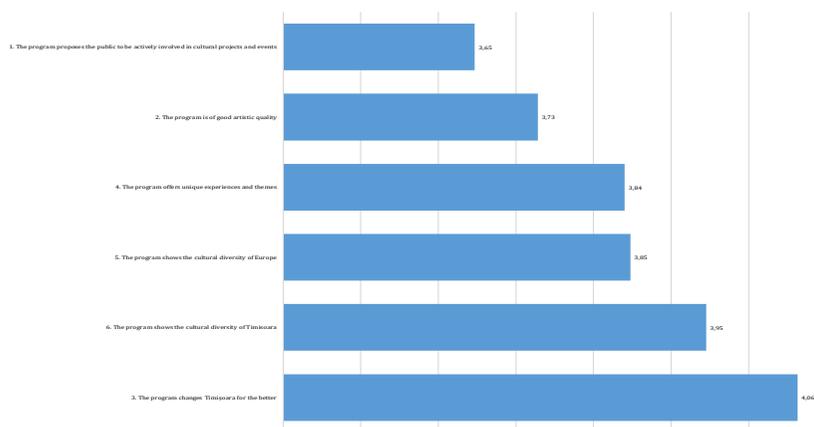
Q13. Are you personally willing to support this project through volunteer activities? (applied in 2021)



The losses of around 40% from the support of the population, even only at the opinion level, represent quite some negative circumstances under which the program actually started in February 2023. Again, is not about the refuse of the implication (only 11.4% said that in 2021), but is about the transformation of the public support into an expectative

position. If the involved stakeholders don't find the adequate frame of cooperation, why people should be enthusiastic about the cultural offer of the Tm ECC23 program? And this is nothing but a common social reaction to some incoherent behaviours into the program management: the intention of the municipality to take over the first NGO (Timisoara European Capital of Culture 2021) and the replacement of this with a new structure (Center for Projects Timisoara 2023) after the political change at the Timisoara City Hall. Plenty of voices remained into a critique negative direction despite the previous perspective such as a higher level of beneficial, long lasting changes for the city as European Capital of Culture. The last sociological survey applied in July 2023 with an item on this topic reflects the direct consequences of losing the public connection with the program:

**Figure 11 - Statements about Tm ECC2023 - weighted values
(1 = strongly disagree / 5 = strongly agree)**



The best rated statements were related with the positive impact of the Tm ECC23 for Timisoara (4.06 from 5, equivalent with 81.2%) and the opportunity of this program to express the cultural diversity of the city (3.95 from 5, that is 79%). At the opposite level, the least rated statements were about the artistic quality of the program (3.73 from 5, that is 74.6%) and the actively involvement of the public (3.65 from 5, and that is 73%). With an average score of 3.84 (from 5), equivalent with over 76% level of positive appreciation of the Tm ECC 23 (by these six dimensions), we can estimate that the mid term evaluation of the entire activities related by this program reflect a quite high favorable perspective. Beyond the quality of the activities included in the program and the methodology and selection criteria, the performance of all these cultural events brought a consistent added value to the image of Timisoara

4. Conclusions

One of the most important dimensions of the European Capital of Culture program is the involvement of the local population into dedicated activities, orientated toward the extension of the educational role of culture. With a community directly involved into the cultural manifestations, an ECC has achieved its main goal, to increase the cultural level of the regional area, and, by this, to update the quality of life. In the case of Timisoara, it is quite certain that the Tm-ECC23 program has started below the real potential of engaging of bettering the cultural resources of the city. Many of the suspicion's thoughts and negative feelings regarding the public space could have been avoided if the entire preparation of the program, from 2016 until 2023 would have been done into a more transparent and convergent way. But the benefits for the city can be already seen, from the renewed faades

until the cultural revitalization of neighborhoods. The ECC23 program has transformed Timisoara into an attractive cultural destination, and plenty of tourists have come from all over the world. Many of valuable public spaces, such historical squares, pedestrian streets and old abandoned buildings (like The Barracks U) have been revitalized and reintegrated into the city life. The local cultural institutions have prepared a very dense program with several main international events very attractive even for the international participation.

The increased public interest for the cultural activities and the upgrade of the creative sectors will be the main indicators for the further evaluation of the Tm ECC23 impact. The next researches will evidence the global social impact of the entire program, during this year and, very important, during the following years. All these data will show us if the city will reach an upgraded cultural vitality, or if it will remain only with some special memories.

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