Igor Mavrin

European Capital of Culture and Sustainable Tourism: Challenges, Trends and Perspectives

Abstract

European Capital of Culture (ECoC), as a long-term cultural initiative of the European Union, has inevitably become intertwined with tourism development in designated cities. For almost four decades, medium-sized and small cities across Europe have been allowed to shift their local economies towards creativity and cultural tourism, driven by the ECoC title, with different cities achieving different levels of success. Since the 1990s, the ECoC initiative has followed the EU's trends, resolutions, and recommendations. The mid-2000s, 2010s, and early 2020s have given the trend a new drive with a more procedural approach in the ECoC bidding process. Sustainable development is one of the EU's main strategic goals in the new era, and sustainable tourism has also influenced the ECoC initiative, making it one of the key priorities. This paper analyses the concepts of modern cultural tourism and the phenomena of over-tourism and sustainable tourism, especially in the ECoC context. Research methodology is based on secondary sources, including scientific papers, bid books and other official documents drawn up by ECoC cities and ECoC reports. The paper seeks to recognise and systematise the changes in cultural tourism trends in the ECoC context.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture (ECoC), cultural tourism, sustainable tourism, over-tourism, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Over-tourism, a phenomenon referring to the excessive inflow of tourists to one destination, has become one of the main issues in the contemporary travel industry. Goodwin (2017) examines the causes of this phenomenon that have a negative impact on crowded tourist destinations, including the lower cost of travel, disintermediation and P2P platforms, free use of public spaces, tourism as a job creator, and activities of destination marketing organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted global trends in tourism, slowing down the industry that had thus far been on a continuous upward path. After the decline in tourism figures in 2020 and 2021, recovery began in 2022, with figures for the first seven months reaching 57 per cent of pre-pandemic levels (UNWTO [United Nations World Tourism Organization], 2022). Global public policies recognized the issues related to over-tourism and provided actions to address this phenomenon. The European Union launched the Smart Tourism initiative, with the European Capital of Smart Tourism as the leading driver of transformation in tourism (European Commission, 2022). The concept rests on four pillars – sustainability, accessibility, digitalization, and cultural heritage and creativity – that provide a model to be implemented in other global destinations.

Sustainability as the pillar of the smart tourism concept correlates with other global initiatives, such as the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Foundation, 2015) or the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019). The European Parliament adopted the EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (European Parliament, 2021), which primarily addresses the impact of the pandemic on tourism.

Igor Mavrin, PhD, Corresponding Author, University in Osijek, Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, Republic of Croatia; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9260-3479; e-mail: imavrin@aukos.hr; imavrin@gmail.com

Global public policies introduce sustainability as one of the critical priorities in every segment of human activity. This paper will analyse the concept of sustainability, emphasising sustainable tourism, in the context of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) initiative. Since its launch in 1985, ECoC has become a culture-driven urban and regional development accelerator, with tourism as one of the main pillars of economic impact. The next chapter provides a literature review focusing on two main themes: over-tourism vs. sustainable tourism and ECoC in the context of (sustainable) cultural tourism. Based on the literature overview, the author will then define the hypothesis and research methodology. The research will be presented in the final chapters, along with a discussion and analysis of results and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

Our literature review will focus on analysing the sustainable tourism concept as a response to over-tourism. Secondarily, sustainable tourism will be examined in the context of cultural and (cultural) tourism in the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC).

2.1. From over-tourism to sustainable (cultural) tourism

Several institutions operating on a global scale have offered different definitions of sustainable tourism. According to UNWTO (2022), sustainable tourism combines optimal use of environmental resources, respect for the authenticity of local communities, conservation of cultural heritage and traditional values, and long-term economic actions providing benefits in socio-economic terms to all stakeholders. UNEP [United Nations Environment Programme] and UNWTO (2005, 11-12) define sustainable tourism as "that fully considers its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities". Other terms emerged from the sustainable tourism concept, such as responsible travel, which refers to the behaviour of travellers making choices following sustainable tourism practices (GSTC [Global Sustainable Tourism Council], 2022), or the reliable tourism concept (Green Tourism, 2022), a synonym for sustainable tourism that was coined because of potential overuse or the lack of understanding of sustainability as a term.

The environmental impact of tourism has been the scientific community's focus since the late 1970s, emphasising implications related to the intensity of site use and the resilience of ecosystems (Cohen, 1978). Hunter (1997) argued that sustainable tourism requires behavioural changes from tourists and operators instead of merely zonal protection of endangered areas. Since the early studies, especially in the 2000s, the number of scientific articles focusing on sustainable tourism has increased, mainly on European case studies (Guo et al., 2019), creating a space for sustainable tourism policies. Sunlu (2003) identifies several environmental impacts of tourism, which could be summarized as depletion of natural resources (water resources, local resources, and land degradation), pollution (air pollution and noise, solid waste and littering, sewage, and aesthetic pollution), physical impacts (impacted by the development of tourism and tourism activities), and global impact (loss of biodiversity, depletion of the ozone layer, and climate change). In terms of sustainable tourism, to tackle climate change, it will be necessary to improve communications, mobilize knowledge, increase research capacities, and engage in strategic policies and planning (Scott, 2021). Sustainability is also present in contemporary tourism policies to a significant degree (Carić, 2018), putting pressure on destinations to have a more sustainable approach in planning touristic activities. Environmental commitment (Hoppstadius et al., 2018) and sustainable tourism indicators (Brščić et al., 2020) are becoming imperative in destination planning and management.

Sustainable tourism could be defined as conventional or alternative tourism compatible with or contributing to sustainable development (Liu, 2003). Hardy et al. (2002) consider sustainable tourism grounded in the general population and more likely to be developed beyond rhetoric considerations. Budeanu et al. (2015)

imply that sustainable tourism is hard to achieve for various reasons, including the heterogeneity of stakeholders in the tourism industry and the differences in travellers' socio-economic and cultural characteristics. Recent studies link the sustainable tourism concept to innovative city initiatives (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2021) and consider it a driver of the revival of tourism in the post-COVID-19 era (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021). Regarding studies examining the interconnections between sustainable tourism and economic development, Leon-Gomez et al. (2021) noted that impacts have mainly been concentrated in hospitality, sustainable and green technology, and environmental sciences. Font et al. (2021) considers the possibility of destinations establishing their sustainability indicator systems, leading to destination competitiveness. Sustainability is an essential issue for the development of rural tourism, especially in the context of indigenous communities (Falak et al., 2016). It is also gaining importance in tourism education (Paris, 2016).

Cultural tourism is an essential part of the global travelling and leisure industry. It should also become a part of the sustainable tourism movement, implementing principles and trends of responsible travel aimed towards preserving cultural heritage and tourism ecosystems worldwide. Cultural tourism is changing, shifting from heritage sites to new venues and making room for new operators (Richards, 2021). Focusing on urban geography and sustainable tourism development, cultural attractions should be concentrated near the city centres, within walking distance (Aranburu et al., 2016). Some authors emphasise the role of cultural identity and authenticity in the development of sustainable cultural tourism (Poort et al., 2021), especially in the context of rural cultural tourism (Mukhils & Estella de Costa, 2021), and having in mind the perceptions of residents (AbbasiDorcheh & Mohamed, 2013). Education of the local population to participate in tourism development could be a path to more sustainable cultural tourism (Ioan-Franc & Istoc, 2007). Sustainable cultural tourism should focus on social, economic, and ecological sustainability (Durovic & Lovrentjev, 2014) based on the indicators for all three interconnected fields, considering both positive and negative effects. Sustainable cultural tourism can also rely on a combination of ethics and social responsibility in managing a destination's internal and external environment (Istoc, 2012). The role of cultural and natural landscapes in developing tourism as a goal can also be monitored as one of the issues in sustainable tourism, along with the preservation of landscapes and the creation of a destination eco strategy (Sandel, 2016).

Over-tourism has also become a significant point of research interest, in parallel with sustainability within tourism as a growing economic field. The term 'turismophobia' emerged alongside the term 'over-tourism' (Verrisimo et al., 2020). The roots of the anti-tourism movement date back to the 1970s (Milano et al., 2019b). Perkumiene and Pranskuniene (2019) compare sustainable tourism and over-tourism through the opposition or coexistence of two rights – the right to travel and live. Impacts of over-tourism could be grouped into distinct categories (Koens et al., 2018), such as overcrowding in the streets and public transport combined with heavy traffic; noise and disturbance; loss of amenities for residents due to tourism shops; loss of housing and loss of security and sense of community; and increased waste and pollution. Researchers noted community protests in several locations troubled by over-tourism – including Barcelona, Venice, San Sebastian, Berlin, Palma de Mallorca, and Island – with issues also raised worldwide (Goodwin, 2017). Issues emerging from over-tourism could be neutralized by implementing community-based tourism concepts (Giampiccoli et al., 2020), with tourism activities managed and owned by local communities.

The shift from over tourism to more sustainable tourism is a prerequisite for developing tourism in Europe and globally. Speaking about development by itself and not making it sustainable and/or more responsible could be considered a paradox because development could not be considered development without incorporating sustainability. The cultural (and creative) tourism approach is one of the paths to more sustainable tourism because opposition to mass tourism movements open new development models for tourism. However, cultural tourism in some forms, mainly in the superficial incarnation of sightseeing in overburdened cities like Venice,

Barcelona, or Dubrovnik, could be a part of the problem, not the solution. A potential pathway towards sustainable/responsible cultural tourism could lie in more educational activities regarding the significance of cultural heritage and community ecosystems and raising awareness about possible adverse effects of excessive tourist movements on local balance. Initiatives like the European Capital of Culture could be one of the platforms for raising awareness on emerging over-tourism issues.

2.2. ECoC and (cultural) tourism development

The European Capital of Culture initiative has been the subject of interest for researchers since the 1990s, including tourism among the monitored impacts. In the early days of ECoC research, Myerscough (1994) mentions tourism as one of the impacts of ECoC in the early years of the initiative, emphasising the interconnections between arts and tourism and culture and tourism. In the second decade of the initiative, 1995-2004, ECoC cities included tourism among the objectives of their projects, both nationally and internationally, with a particular emphasis on the segment of cultural tourism. The relationship between culture and tourism was examined in the Krakow 2000 ECoC project, also known as K2000, combining the impacts on image and tourism but without significant efforts in the city concerning ECoC project implementation (Hughes et al., 2003).

Tourism impacts were significant in the first two decades of the ECoC initiative, and later, ECoC cities provided reports with more specific and measured tourism impacts. Liverpool 2008 resulted in 9.7 million visits to the city driven by the ECoC title, supporting almost 15,000 jobs in the city and region (Impacts 08 & England's Northwest Research Service, 2010). On a smaller scale, Maribor 2012 registered an increase in overnights of 20 per cent year-on-year, with international tourists accounting for 81 per cent of the overnights (Srakar & Vecco, 2017). Košice in Slovakia, which held the ECoC title in 2013, experienced a shift from traditional forms of cultural tourism in museums and galleries towards more innovative concepts, like festivals and street art (Šebova et al., 2014), and the development of creative tourism in the creative city (Borsekova et al., 2017). The ECoC initiative could also be considered a critical promotor of European cultural tourism (Šebova et al., 2014).

Sibiu in Romania, the holder of the ECoC title in 2007, saw improvements and investments in tourism infrastructure, with new hotels for sustainable and long-term tourism growth, followed by advances in the city brand (Cosma et al., 2009), which is indicative of the potential for sustainable tourism in post-ECoC cities. Planning the legacy of the ECoC project, including tourist venues, is considered a reasonable approach during bid creation (Payer, 2014), leading to sustainability success. Cooperation between contemporary ECoC cities in urban tourism and cross-border context has also been approached, with Novi Sad 2022 in Serbia and Timisoara 2023 in Romania as case studies for this model (Radoi, 2020). More recent research on ECoC cities also emphasises the development of tourism in the context of resilient cities (Ivona et al., 2019), creating a path for more sustainable ECoC cultural tourism. The model for developing tourism in the ECoC context could also be monitored through cultural involvement, with place attachment, in terms of identity and dependence and a focus on positive and negative economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts (Blešić et al., 2022). The concept of transformative tourism within ECoC cities has been developed throughout the TraCEs project (Cultour is Capital, 2019), suggesting that there is a need for cooperation between ECoC cities, the CCI sector, and tourism stakeholders.

Although the ECoC initiative might be seen as contradictory, insisting on European attractiveness and a sustainable neighbourhood approach at the same time, its main strength lies within partial trends in the 2010s and 2020s of designating European small and medium cities with little or no international recognition as cultural capitals. This platform could be approached as a model for training sustainable tourism and creating the model of a sustainable/responsible European tourism city.

3. Research design and methodology

The following research questions have emerged in the literature review phase:

- What is the role of sustainability in contemporary ECoC cities?
- How is sustainability implemented in bidding processes in ECoC candidate cities?
- How is sustainable tourism implemented in the development of ECoC bids?

4. Research: Sustainable tourism concept within ECoC bid books 2020-2027

For this paper, which analyses the impact of sustainability concepts on European Capitals of Culture, the designated ECoC cities in 2020-2027 (current programming period) will be analysed. The analysis will include the bid books as the primary documents of ECoC cities, both those that have already implemented their programmes and those in the waiting line. The comparison of the bid books will reveal the presence and trends of sustainability within the ECoC cities, with a particular emphasis on sustainability in tourism development planning. The keywords related to sustainability and (sustainable) tourism (along with related terms) will be searched within PDF documents of the ECoC cities' bid books. The indicators related to tourism and sustainability will also be analysed in the same documents.

Table 1
Designated European Capitals of Culture 2020-2027

ECoC year	City	Country
2020	Rijeka	Croatia
2020	Galway	Ireland
2021	Continuance of Rijeka 2020 and Galway 2020 due to Covid-19	
2022	Kaunas	Lithuania
2022	Esch	Luxemburg
2022	Novi Sad[1]	Serbia
2023	Veszprem	Hungary
2023	Timisoara[2]	Romania
2023	Eleusis[3]	Greece
2024	Bad Ischl	Austria
2024	Tartu	Estonia
2024	Bodø	Norway
2025	Chemnitz	Germany
2025	Nova Gorica	Slovenia
2026	Oulu	Finland
2026	Trenčin	Slovakia
2027	Liepaja	Latvia

Source: Adapted from the European Commission (2022).

Table 1 shows that 16 cities from 16 different European countries, both EU members and non-members, were designated as ECoC cities in the eight years covered by our research. The Portuguese city was still not established for 2027 when the paper was finished. It will bring the total to 17 cities from 17 countries in 2020-2027 when it joins the others. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the programmes of 2020 ECoCs (Rijeka and Galway) were extended until spring 2021, and there were no formal ECoCs this year. Original 2021 ECoCs were moved to the following years (Novi Sad 2021 to 2022, Timisoara 2021 and Eleusis 2021 to 2023).

---

[1] Moved from 2021 to 2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
[2] Moved from 2021 to 2023 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
[3] Moved from 2021 to 2023 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. Keyword analysis in ECoC bid books 2020-2027

To establish the incidence of keywords, i.e. terms regarding sustainability, tourism, and development, 16 bid books from 16 ECoC cities (2020-2027) were analysed for key terms, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Sustainability and tourism-related terms in 2020-2027 ECoC bid books

ECoC	The count for the terms 'sustainability' and 'responsibility' and related terms	The count for the term 'tourism' and related terms	The count for the term 'development' and related terms
Rijeka 2020	sustainable (13) responsible (13) sustainability (10) environmental (10) environment (9) responsibility (4) ecological (3) ecology (3) environments (3) environmentally (2) ecologically (1) responsibilities (1) *sustainable development (1)*	tourist (34) tourism (25) tourists (8) touristic (2)	development (112) developed (32) develop (25) developing (18) developmental (1) *sustainable development (1)*
Galway 2020	sustainable (32) sustainability (24) environment (18) responsibility (14) environmental (11) environments (9) responsible (8) ecological (4) sustainably (2) environmentally (2) ecology (1) *sustainable development (1)*	tourism (14) tourist (2) tourists (2) touristic (1)	development (123) develop (47) developed (37) developing (18) developers (1) *sustainable development (1)*
Novi Sad 2022	responsible (23) sustainable (20) environment (12) responsibility (6) sustainability (2) ecological (1) ecology (1)	tourist (45) tourism (32) tourists (14)	development (111) develop (37) developed (28) developing (25)
Kaunas 2022	responsible (22) environment (22) sustainable (9) responsibility (6) environments (3) responsibilities (2) environmental (1) environmentally (1) sustainability (1) ecological (1)	tourism (24) tourists (16) tourist (6) touristic (2)	development (88) develop (33) developed (24) developing (14) developers (3)
Esch 2022	sustainable (24) responsible (16) responsibility (11) sustainability (7) sustainably (7) ecology (6) *sustainable development (6)* environment (5) responsibilities (2) ecological (1) environmental (1) environmentally (1) *sustainable developments (1)*	tourism (16) tourist (4) tourists (3)	development (74) developed (30) develop (15) developing (9) *sustainable development (6)* developments (5) *sustainable developments (1)*

Table 2 *(continued)*

Veszprem 2023	responsible (16) sustainable (12) environment (9) responsibility (6) sustainability (4) environmentally (3) environments (3) ecological (3) environmental (2) *sustainable development (2)* sustainably (1) *sustainable tourism (1)*	tourism (26) tourist (10) touristic (2) tourists (1) *sustainable tourism (1)*	development (50) develop (11) developing (3) developed (2) developments (2) *sustainable development (2)*
Timisoara 2023	responsible (23) sustainable (19) responsibility (18) environment (16) sustainability (8) environmental (5) responsibilities (2) ecology (1) *sustainable development (1)*	tourism (117) tourists (59) tourist (22) touristic (8)	development (133) developed (38) develop (26) developing (17) develops (5) *sustainable development (1)*
Eleusis 2023	environment (57) environmental (39) sustainable (36) sustainability (22) responsible (21) *sustainable development (17)* responsibility (3) environmentally (2) ecology (1) ecological (1)	tourist (19) tourism (14) tourists (7) touristic (1)	development (116) develop (39) developed (19) *sustainable development (17)* developmental (1)
Bad Ischl 2024	environment (27) environmental (23) sustainable (21) responsible (11) responsibility (10) *sustainable tourism (8)* sustainability (5) ecological (4) responsibilities (3) sustainably (2) ecology (2) environments (2) *sustainable development (2)* environmentally (1)	tourism (117) tourists (21) tourist (12) *sustainable tourism (8)*	development (49) developed (33) develop (30) developing (14) developments (3) *sustainable development (2)*
Tartu 2024	environment (34) sustainable (29) environmental (22) ecological (17) ecology (15) responsible (11) environments (8) sustainability (5) *sustainable development (5)* responsibility (4) ecologically (3) environmentalists (3) environmentally (3) sustainably (1) ecologist (1)	tourism (19) tourists (8) tourist (3) touristic (3)	development (58) developing (29) developed (15) develop (8) *sustainable development (5)* developer (2)

Table 2 *(continued)*

Bodø 2024	sustainable (18) environment (13) responsible (11) sustainability (10) ecological (7) *sustainable development (4)* environments (3) responsibilities (3) responsibility (3) environmental (2) environmentally (2) ecologically (1) ecology (1) sustainably (1)	tourist (4) tourism (3) tourist (2)	development (53) develop (43) developed (23) developing (19) *sustainable development (4)* developments (1)
Chemnitz 2025	sustainable (31) responsibility (14) environment (12) sustainability (8) *sustainable development (8)* responsible (4) sustainably (1) ecology (1) environmental (1)	tourism (34) tourists (7) tourist (1)	development (84) develop (34) developed (23) developing (8) *sustainable development (8)* developments (4) developer (1) developers (1)
Nova Gorica 2025	sustainable (33) environment (20) sustainability (14) environmental (8) responsible (4) ecological (3) sustainably (3) *sustainable tourism (3)* responsibility (2) *sustainable development (2)* *sustainable tourist (1)* ecology (1)	tourism (42) tourist (9) touristic (6) tourists (3) *sustainable tourism (3)* *sustainable tourist (1)*	development (69) develop (53) *sustainable development (2)* developers (1)
Oulu 2026	sustainable (29) environmental (16) environment (13) sustainability (13) environments (8) *sustainable development (8)* *sustainable tourism (2)* ecological (2) environmentally (2) ecology (2) ecologically (1) sustainably (1)	tourism (14) tourist (3) *sustainable tourism (2)* tourists (1)	development (33) develop (23) developing (12) *sustainable development (8)* developed (7) developers (1)
Trenčin 2026	sustainable (64) sustainability (23) ecological (22) *sustainable tourism (1)*	visitors (50) *sustainable tourism (1)*	Development (72) Developed (40) Develop (31) Developing (18) Developments (5)
Liepaja 2027	sustainable (24) ecology (14) sustainability (11) responsible (8) responsibility (8) responsibilities (5) ecological (4) ecologies (4) ecologically (1) sustainably (1)	tourism (29) tourist (5) tourists (1)	development (83) develop (42) developed (28) developing (20) developers (5)

Source: Edited by the author and extracted from ECoC bid books 2020-2027.

4.2. The analysis of sustainability and tourism impacts and indicators (ECoC bid books 2020-2027)

For further elaboration on the sustainability of sustainable tourism in contemporary ECoC cities, selected impacts and/or indicators regarding both terms have also been analysed and presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Indicators/impacts related to sustainable development and tourism

ECoC city	Sustainability indicators/impacts	Tourism indicators/impacts
Rijeka 2020	Environmental sustainability (No of commuters on public transport; No of events that use regular promotion of environmental awareness).	No employees in tourism. Total room nights in the city and the region.
Galway 2020	No indicators.	Number of visitors; Total revenue spent by tourists.
Novi Sad 2022	No indicators.	Number of trained workers in the tourism and services sectors; Perception of local brands; The average annual increase in the number of tourists; Average annual growth in overnights. The average yearly increase in the length of stay (hotel tourist nights); The average amount of spending per tourist. Number of people working in the tourism and services sector; Increase in the share of own revenue in the budgets of cultural institutions.
Kaunas 2022	No indicators.	European/international audience interest is enhanced, and visits are triggered.
Esch 2022	Sustainability/reference to long-term strategy.	No indicators.
Veszprem 2023	*Ecological impacts:* Solutions for sustainable land use in the region will be widely known and applied; Much higher level of social and environmental consciousness; The new "green" festival standards will be an essential requirement – for both organisers and guests; Increased green networking and a healthy urban climate. *Urban impacts:* Environment-friendly modes of transport become more popular. *Economic impacts:* Shared economy solutions will strengthen entrepreneurship.	*Economic impacts:* The region becomes a year-round tourist destination. *Image and identity impact:* Veszprém and Balaton will become a lifestyle brand in addition to a tourism brand.
Timisoara 2023	No indicators.	Number of new direct flight connections from Timisoara; Analysis of creative and relational tourism chains started in the city and region.
Eleusis 2023	Growing a sustainable urban economy.	Increase in tourist visits.
Bad Ischl 2024	Development of environmental indicators: Cultural and tourist offers need to reflect on the inclusion of environmental aspects and ecological production methods, the use of regional products in the culinary arts, the revitalization of existing buildings for cultural purposes or the return to older, environmentally friendly crafting techniques. Learn and benefit from the 12 environmental indicators which are the basis for the selection of a city as a European Green Capital (EGC): *Climate Change Mitigation; Adaptation; Sustainable Urban Mobility; Land Use; Nature and Biodiversity; Air Quality; Noise; Waste; Water; Green Growth and Eco-Innovation; Energy Performance; Governance.*	No indicators.
Tartu 2024	Tartuvians value sustainable development; Tartu and the region are pioneers in re- and upcycling; Tartu is a pioneer in the development of biodiverse human-scale urban spaces; Tartu and the region are pioneers in environmentally sustainable event management; New eco-friendly tourism products and services; Urban dwellers reconnect with the natural environment in Tartu; Revived appreciation for nature skills, crafts and DIY; River Emajõgi back in active use.	New eco-friendly tourism products and services; People of Tartu/region are hospitable to short- and long-term international visitors; Tartu and the region are the fastest-growing cultural tourism destinations.

Table 3 *(continued)*

Bodø 2024	No indicators.	No indicators.
Nova Gorica 2025	Increase in urban cross-border cycling paths; Decrease in motorised traffic in city centres; Increase in suburban and rural cycling paths; Increase of bike sharing opportunities. Increased number of suburban and rural cycling paths; Increase in public transport connecting suburban and rural areas with city centres; Number of zero-waste / low-impact cultural events; Decrease in the environmental impact of agricultural and tourism sectors. Increase in zero-emission vehicles, smart grids and networks.	Increase in tourism direct gross domestic product of the area. Decrease in environmental impact of agricultural and tourism sectors.
Chemnitz 2025	Greater self-initiative to improve city environment.	Noticeable increase in experiences and events for creative tourists. 4% sustainable annual increase in visitor spending in the city and region; Chemnitz appears in digital forums consulted by international creative tourists.
Oulu 2026	Carbon-neutral cultural life.	No indicators.
Trenčin 2026	All Trenčín 2026 events will be implemented in an ecologically sustainable manner; All cultural infrastructures will be developed in line with the principles of circular economy; All 18 regional cities will have developed a green cultural strategy for their cultural offices; Trenčín 2026 marketing will be green; Offset CO2 production of cultural activities in the region by 2030.	No indicators.
Liepaja 2027	Goal 2: From mental to environmental: Co-creating our habitat (more people living active, healthy lifestyles; more people walking and cycling, more bike lanes)	No indicators.

Source: Edited by author, extracted from ECoC bid books 2020-2027.

The keywords and indicators for 2020-2027 ECoC cities will be analysed and discussed in a separate subchapter.

4.3. Discussion and limitations of the research

As shown in Table 2, which analyses keywords from 16 bid books from 16 ECoC cities from 2020 to 2027, terms regarding sustainability/responsibility/ecology/environment occur together with terms dealing with tourism and terms regarding development. Most cities in the early 2020s excessively used terms related to tourism and sustainability without overlapping the terms 'sustainable' and 'tourism', except the Veszprem 2023 ECoC ('sustainable tourism' occurs eight times). Chemnitz 2025 focuses on 'sustainable development' (mentioned eight times), and Nova Gorica 2025 focuses on both 'sustainable tourism' and 'sustainable development' concepts. Oulu 2026 also deals with both terms ('sustainable tourism' and 'sustainable development'), while Trenčin 2026 transcends the term 'tourists', replacing it with 'visitors', which also implies a strategical and conceptual shift. Liepaja 2027, however, does not follow the trend and focuses on groups of terms separately, without combining them.

As shown by the data on the impacts and indicators related to sustainability and environmental issues, combined with tourism impact and indicators in Table 3, there is a clear shift from more tourism driven ECoCs in the early 2020s towards a more sustainable/environmental approach in later ECoC cities. The programme of Novi Sad 2022 is firmly rooted in the development of tourism in the city and region as the chosen indicators in the field of tourism, and the number of arrows indicates what the implementing city considers a success. Hungarian Veszprem 2023, on the other hand, places a greater emphasis on sustainability issues, dividing the environmental impacts into three categories – ecological, urban, and economic effects. Bad Ischl 2024 connects ECoC environmental indicators and the principles for European Green Capitals (12 hands),

creating a unique collaborative platform between the two initiatives. Tartu 2024 introduces a set of expected sustainability-related impacts, dealing with sustainable events, biodiversity in urban spaces, recycling and upcycling, and eco-tourism initiatives. Nova Gorica 2025 creates the desired environmental results concerning sustainable traffic solutions, including cycling and sustainable public transportation, combined with expected tourism impacts rooted in sustainability. Trenčin 2026 insists on concepts like green marketing, circular economy, and sustainable and carbon-neutral events, with green strategies implemented within the cultural offices of partnering cities. Oulu 2026 has not developed clear indicators at the bid book level but emphasises the goal of 'carbon neutral cultural life'. Liepaja 2027 focuses on changes in the lifestyle of its citizens as a part of its sustainability goals. Some of the designated cities have an inferior approach to impact planning and indicator design (Esch 2022, Bodø 2024), have limited numbers of indicators defined in both sustainability and tourism (Rijeka 2020, Eleusis 2023), or have put more emphasis on different social and economic issues (Kaunas 2022, Timisoara 2021). However, the trend of a growing environmental approach to cultural development and tourism is observed in the upcoming cultural capitals.

Limitations to the research lie in the fact that the study covered only the European Capitals of Culture bid books. Although this analysis can suggest and imply the emergence of a trend of a more sustainable approach to development and (cultural) tourism, it has limitations regarding its data sources. Further research should focus on monitoring the design, creation, and success of implementing specific projects related to sustainable tourism and sustainable development.

5. Conclusion

The European Capital of Culture initiative has continuously evolved since its onset, focusing on connections between arts and culture and other essential issues in European societies. Bid books, as a contemporary approach to ECoC designation, showcase the trends and developments that could be related to trends and perspectives in European policies. Issues like urban (re)development, political and historical burden, creative industries-based urban economies, and other subjects were all addressed first within bid books and then within ECoC cities implementing their programmes.

The contemporary ECoCs, especially the emerging ones in 2023 and beyond, focus more on sustainable development issues, including developing new sustainable tourism models. From the perspective of the average size of the coming cultural capitals and their current economies, it is essential that they still have the opportunity for further tourism development. Future ECoC candidate cities, competing for the designation for 2028 and beyond, should focus their bids on sustainability concepts, connecting the ECoC legacy with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, eco- and green tourism initiatives, community-based projects, and net-zero carbon events. (Over)investments in infrastructure and expensive hallmark events attracting masses of international tourists, often leaving cities' budgets burdened with long-term debt, will no longer be connected to the ECoC initiative. Bidding cities will anticipate economic growth and social development, but their aspirations will need a green and sustainable prefix for their bids to succeed. Tourism will undoubtedly remain a significant part of future ECoCs. Approaching this anticipated tourism growth, induced by the ECoC designation, from the environmental perspective opens the platform for creating a European middle-sized sustainable city model rooted in responsible destination management and sustainable events (co)created by/for the citizens and attractive for the visitors simultaneously. It could be regarded as a sustainable ECoC tourism city of tomorrow.

References

AbbasiDorcheh, S., & Mohamed, B. (2013). Local perception of tourism development: A conceptual framework for the sustainable cultural tourism. *Journal of Management and Sustainability, 3*(2), 31-39. http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/jms.v3n2p31

Arunburu, I., Plaza, B., & Esteban, M. (2016). Sustainable cultural tourism in urban destinations: Does space matter? *Sustainability, 8*(8), Article 699; https://doi.org/10.3390/su8080699

Bad Ischl 2024. (2020). *Bad Ischl-Salzkammergut 2024 European Capital of Culture candidate city* (Bid book).

Blešić, I., Pivac, T., Kovačić, S., Cimbaljević, M., Lukić, T., Bubalo Živković, M., Đerčan, B., & Bjelajac, D. (2022). Place attachment, cultural involvement, and residents' attitudes towards tourism development: The case of Novi Sad, the European Capital of Culture 2022. *Sustainability, 14*(15), Article 9103. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14159103

Bodo 2024. (2019). *Arcticulation: European Capital of Culture application* (Bid book).

Borsekova, K., Vanova, A., & Vitališova, K. (2017). Building Košice European Capital of Culture: Towards a creative city? In N. Bellini & C. Pasquinelli (Eds.), *Tourism in the city. Towards an integrative agenda on urban tourism* (pp. 193-204). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26877-4

Brščić, K., Prats Planaguma, L., Raschi, A., Marchi, V., Šugar, T., Lovrečić, K., & Poljuha, D. (2020). Can indicators for sustainable tourism improve tourism planning in the coastal destinations? Empirical evidence from Catalonia, Istrian Region and Tuscany Region. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 68*(2), 144-155. https://doi.org/10.37741/t.68.2.3

Budeanu A., Miller G., Moscardo G., & Ooi, C.-S. (2015). Sustainable tourism, progress, challenges and opportunities: Introduction to this special volume. *Journal of Cleaner Production, 111*(Part B), 285-294. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.10.027

Carić, H. (2018). Perspectives of greening tourism development – The concepts, the policies, the implementation. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 66*(1), 78-88. https://hrcak.srce.hr/197385

Chemnitz 2025. (2021). *Chemnitz 2025 European Capital of Culture – final bid book*.

Cohen, E. (1978). The impact of tourism on the physical environment. *Annals of Tourism Research, 5*(2), 215-237. https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(78)90221-9

Cosma, S., Negrusa, A., & Popovici, C. (2009). Impact of Sibiu European Capital of Culture 2007 event on country tourism. In *Proceedings of the 2nd WSEAS international conference on cultural heritage and tourism* (pp. 68-73). https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Adina-Negrusa/publication/260300392_Impact_of_Sibiu_European_Capital_of_Culture_2007_event_on_country_tourism/links/0a85e53b79e221e5a7000000/Impact-of-Sibiu-European-Capital-of-Culture-2007-event-on-country-tourism.pdf

Cultour is Capital. (2019). *TraCEs – Transformative tourism across European Capital of Culture*. http://www.cultouriscapital.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/TraCEs-Guideline-Final-low.pdf

Durovic, M., & Lovrentjev, S. (2014). Indicators of sustainability in cultural tourism. *The Macrotheme Review. A multidisciplinary journal of global macro trends, 3*(7), 180-189. https://macrotheme.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/19MR37mj.202135138.pdf

Eleusis 2021. (2017). *Transition to EUphoria: Eleusis 2021 European Capital of Culture candidate city* (Bid book).

Esch 2022. (2018). *Remix culture Esch-sur-Alzette: Candidate city European Capital of Culture* (Bid book).

European Commission. (2008). *European Green Capital Award - About the EU Green Capital Award*. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/urban-environment/european-green-capital-award/about-eu-green-capital-award_en

European Commission. (2019). *A European Green Deal*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en European Commission

European Commission. (2022). *Designated European Capitals of Culture*. https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture

European Commission. (2022). *European Capitals of Smart Tourism*. https://smart-tourism-capital.ec.europa.eu/index_en

European Commission. (2022). *Sustainable development*. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/development-and-sustainability/sustainable-development_en

European Parliament. (2021). *Establishing an EU strategy for sustainable tourism*. https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/summary.do?id=1656802&t=d&l=en

Falak, S., Chiun, L.M., & Wee, A.Y. (2016). Sustainable rural tourism: An indigenous community perspective on positioning rural tourism. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 64*(3), 311-327. https://hrcak.srce.hr/166884

Font, X., Torres-Delgado, A., Crabolu, G., Palomo Martinez, J., Kantenbacher, J., & Miller, G. (2021). The impact of sustainable tourism indicators on destination competitiveness: The European tourism indicator system. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 31*(7), 1608-1630. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.1910281

Galway 2020. (2016). *Making waves: Galway application for European Capital of Culture 2020* (Bid book).

Giampiccoli, A., Mtapuri, O., & Dłużewska, A. (2020). Investigating the intersection between sustainable tourism and community-based tourism. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 68*(4), 415-433. https://doi.org/10.37741/t.68.4.4

Global Sustainable Tourism Council. (2022). *What is sustainable tourism?* https://www.gstcouncil.org/what-is-sustainable-tourism/

Goodwin, H. (2017). *The challenge of overtourism* (Responsible Tourism Partnership Working Paper 4). Millennium Destinations. http://www.millennium-destinations.com/uploads/4/1/9/7/41979675/rtpwp4overtourism012017.pdf

Green Tourism. (2022). *Sustainable tourism*. http://www.greentourism.eu/en/Post/Name/SustainableTourism

Guo, Y., Jiang, J., & Li, S. (2019). A sustainable tourism policy research review. *Sustainability, 11*(11), Article 3187. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11113187

Hardy, A., Beaton, R.J.S., & Pearson, L. (2002). Sustainable tourism: An overview of the concept and its position in relation to conceptualisations of tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 10*(6), 475-496. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580208667183

Hoppstadius, F., & Sandell, K. (2018). Tourism – As exploration and demonstration of which sustainable development? The case of a biosphere reserve. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 66*(2), 161-176. https://hrcak.srce.hr/202745

Hughes, H., Allen, D., & Wasik, D. (2003). The significance of European "Capital of Culture" for tourism and culture: The case of Kraków 2000. *International Journal of Arts Management, 5*(3), 12-23. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41064794?seq=7#metadata_info_tab_contents

Hunter, C. (1997). Sustainable tourism as an adaptive paradigm. *Annals of Tourism Research, 24*(4), 850-867. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(97)00036-4

Impacts 08, & England's Northwest Research Service. (2010). *The economic impact of visits influenced by the Liverpool European Capital of Culture in 2008*. University of Liverpool; Liverpool John Moores University. https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/impacts08/pdf/pdf/Economic_Impact_of_Visits.pdf

Ioan-Franc, V., & Istoc, E.-M. (2007). Cultural tourism and sustainable development. *Romanian Journal of Economic Forecasting, 1*(1), 89-96. https://ipe.ro/rjef/rjef1_07/rjef1_07_7.pdf

Istoc, E.-M. (2012). Urban cultural tourism and sustainable development. *International Journal for Responsible Tourism, Fundatia Amfiteatru, 1*(1), 38-57, http://repec.turismulresponsabil.ro/RePEc/amfarchive/2012-1/2012-1-1-38-57.pdf

Ivars-Baidal, J.A., Vera-Rebollo, J.F., Perles-Ribes, J., Femenia-Serra, F., & Celdrán-Bernabeu, M.A. (2021) Sustainable tourism indicators: What's new within the smart city/destination approach? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 31*(7), 1556-1582. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.1876075

Ivona, A., Rinella, A., & Rinella, F. (2019). Glocal tourism and resilient cities: The case of Matera "European Capital of Culture 2019". *Sustainability, 11*(15), Article 4118. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11154118

Kaunas 2022. (2017). *Kaunas 2022 – Contemporary capital. European Capital of Culture* (Bid book).

Koens, K., Postma, A., & Papp, B. (2018). Is overtourism overused? Understanding the impact of tourism in a city context. *Sustainability. 10*(12), Article 4384. https://doi.org/10.3390/su10124384

León-Gómez, A., Ruiz-Palomo, D., Fernández-Gámez, M.A., & García-Revilla, M.R. (2021). Sustainable tourism development and economic growth: Bibliometric review and analysis. *Sustainability, 13*(4), Article 2270. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042270

Liepaja 2027. (2022). *(un)rest: Liepaja 2027 European Capital of Culture candidate city* (Bid book).

Liu, Z. (2003). Sustainable tourism development: A critique. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 11*(6), 459-475. https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/4105/6/strathprints004105.pdf

Milano, C., Novelli, M., & Cheer, J.M. (2019). Overtourism and tourismphobia: A journey through four decades of tourism development, planning and local concerns. *Tourism Planning & Development, 16*(4), 353-357. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2019.1599604

Mukhils, J., & Estella de Costa, S.L. (2021). Analysis of the Jalawastu area as a sustainable cultural tourism. *Journal of Green Science and Technology, 5*(1), 27-32. https://jurnal.ugj.ac.id/index.php/JGST/article/viewFile/4968/2625

Myerscough, J. (1994). *European Cities of Culture and Cultural Months* (Research study. Full report: Unabridged version). The Network of Cultural Cities of Europe, Glasgow. http://aei.pitt.edu/94755/1/European_Cities_of_Culture._Oct_1994.pdf

Nova Gorica 2025. (2021). *Go! Borderless. Nova Gorica 2025 European Capital of Culture candidate city* (Bid book).

Novi Sad 2021. (2016). *European Capital of Culture – Novi Sad – Candidate city* (Bid book).

Oulu 2026. (2022). *Cultural climate change. Oulu 2026 European Capital of Culture candidate city* (Bid Book).

Palacios-Florencio, B., Santos-Roldan, L., Berbel-Pineda, J.M., & Castillo-Canalejo, A.M. (2021). Sustainable tourism as a driving force of the tourism industry in a post-Covid-19 scenario. *Social Indicators Research, 158*, 991–1011. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-021-02735-2

Paris, C.M. (2016). Sustainability: A threshold concept for tourism education. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 64*(3), 329-337. https://hrcak.srce.hr/166885

Payer, H. (2014). Key Considerations for planning the European Capital of Culture – The case of Veliko Tarnovo. *Athens Journal of Tourism, 4*(1) 253-264. https://www.atiner.gr/journals/tourism/2014-1-4-2-Payer.pdf

Perkumienė D., & Pranskūnienė R. (2019). Overtourism: Between the right to travel and residents' rights. *Sustainability, 11*(7), Article 2138. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11072138

Poort, M.E., PerssonFischier, U., Martinsson-Wallin, H., Elf Donaldson, E., & Schaub, M. (2021). "Authenticity" as a pathway to sustainable cultural tourism? The cases of Gotland and Rapa Nui. *Sustainability, 13*(11), Article 6302. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116302

Rădoi, I. (2020). European Capital of Culture, urban tourism and cross border cooperation between Romania and Serbia. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, 22*(4), 547-559 https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2020.1778881

Richards, G. (2021). *Rethinking cultural tourism*. Edward Elgar. http://dx.doi.org/10.4337/9781789905441

Rijeka 2020 (2016). *Port of diversity. Rijeka – Candidate city for European Capital of Culture* (Bid book).

Sandel, K. (2016). Ecostrategies: Presentation and elaboration of a conceptual framework of landscape perspectives. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 64*(1), 63-80. https://hrcak.srce.hr/154833

Scott, D. (2021). Sustainable tourism and the grand challenge of climate change. *Sustainability 13*(4), Article 1966. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041966

Šebova, M., Džupka, P., Hudec, O., & Urbančikova, N. (2014). Promoting and financing cultural tourism in Europe through European Capitals of Culture: A case study of Košice, European Capital of Culture 2013. *Amfiteatru Economic, 16*(36), 655-670. https://www.amfiteatrueconomic.ro/temp/Article_1298.pdf

Srakar, A., & Vecco, M. (2017). Ex-ante versus ex-post: Comparison of the effects of the European Capital of Culture Maribor 2012 on tourism and employment. *Journal of Cultural Economics, 41*, 197-214. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-017-9294-0

Sunlu, U. (2003). Environmental impacts of tourism. In D. Camarda & L. Grassini (Ed.), *Local resources and global trades: Environments and agriculture in the Mediterranean region* (Options Méditerranéennes: Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 57, pp. 263-270). Conference on the Relationships between Global Trades and Local Resources in the Mediterranean Region, 2002/04. http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=4001977

Tartu 2024. (2020). *Arts of survival. Candidate city – European Capital of Culture* (Bid book).

Timisoara 2021. (2017). *Timisoara 2021 European Capital of Culture candidate city* (Bid book).

Trenčin 2026. (2022). *Cultivating curiosity – Trenčin 2026 candidate for European Capital of Culture* (Bid book).

United Nations Environment Programme & United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2005). *Making tourism more sustainable - A guide for policy makers*. https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284408214

United Nations Foundation (2015). *Sustainable development goals*. https://unfoundation.org/what-we-do/issues/sustainable-development-goals/?gclid=CjwKCAjw7p6aBhBiEiwA83f GuuzUBuZG13XO8HeJ4vCh3bGaOVROM-t0sbNX7RBvZy_4VX5NyB6LlhoCkvQQAvD_BwE

United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2022). *International tourism back to 60% of pre-pandemic levels in January-July 2022*. https://www.unwto.org/taxonomy/term/347

United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2022). *Sustainable development*. https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development

Veríssimo, M., Moraes, M., Breda, Z., Guizi, A., & Costa, C. (2020). Overtourism and tourismphobia: A systematic literature review. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 68*(2), 156-169. https://doi.org/10.37741/t.68.2.4

Veszprem 2023. (2019). *Beyond. Veszprem 2023 European Capital of Culture candidate city* (Bid book).