

# From Inconsistencies to Contingencies - Understanding Policy Complexity of Novi Sad 2021 European Capital of Culture

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## Abstract

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*The case of Novi Sad European Capital of Culture 2021 (NS2021), in which various rationales of cultural policy (local, national, supranational) thread a complex web of political interactions, brings interesting challenges to the theoretical landscape of cultural policy research. We start with the analysis of the Bidbook NS2021 as a cultural policy text, discussing its inconsistencies and ambiguities. Then we study the context and the policy process through participant observation and interviews with key authors. We find that the policy-making process is best explained as contingent - meaning that it is dependent on the historical discourses, demands of the specific policy genre, external requirements and internal pressures, and individual agencies and accidents. In the concluding section, we discuss theoretical and methodological implications that policy contingency poses to cultural policy studies.*

## Coming to terms with policy reality

The link between political speeches and policy documents, on the one hand, and the actual policy measures and actions, on the other, seems to be increasingly problematic. In what Roberts (2010) calls “post-truth politics”, political rhetoric bears no connection to policy agenda (if there is a deliberate agenda at all). While such a style of policy-making is on the rise (e.g. Davies 2016), many academics are trying to understand and explain it. This quest has not bypassed cultural policy research, and recently, several authors have noticed and tried to offer explanations of somewhat blurry and inconsistent manifestations in the cultural policy field.

Discussing the policy-making in transitional societies, Đukić-Dojčinović (2002-2003) posits that Serbian cultural policy is defined by a range of “policy confusions” which she posits are a consequence of the “transitional state” in which Serbia finds itself. In short, due to the fact that the “democratic cultural system has still not been established” (Đukić-Dojčinović 2002-2003: 382), government is not able to run a coherent and clear policy in the field of culture, but instead manifests its work through diverse “policy confusions”, i.e. deviations from the rational policy norm. However, the confusion, lack of coherence and clarity in cultural policy seem not to be unique to “transitional” societies. Gray (2015) points to the “endemic presence of ambiguity” in cultural policy-making in Britain and Western Europe (Gray 2015: 78), suggesting the specific role of vagueness, blurriness and polysemy as capable of balancing diverse opposing interests within a given policy. Selwood (2006) notices divergence from the means-ends policy norm when discussing British cultural policies during the New Labour government, visible in what she terms “conceptual inconsistencies”. She understands them as doubts and uncertainties in the relationship between aims and outcomes of the Department for Culture Media and Sport’s (DCMS) policies, in particular, those that set out to measure various impacts of the arts. By noticing conceptual inconsistencies, she points to paradoxes of evidence-based policies grounded in dubious research and evidence. A few years later, Belfiore (2009) puts forward another critique of the overly positive policy claims on the arts impact in Britain that are not backed by the rigorous research. In formulating the critique of promises and claims made by decision-makers, irrespective of the data which problematizes such claims, she relies on the

concept of “bullshit”, defined originally by Frankfurt (2005). By this definition, “bullshitting” is the act of deliberate and intended misrepresentation on the side of a “bullshitter” who misleads his or her interlocutors in order to pursue his or her own interests and aims (Frankfurt 2005: 56), while at the same time manifesting the lack of any connection with the truth as well as indifference with how things really are (Frankfurt 2005: 30-34). Belfiore notices bullshit in a number of illustrative yet distinct policy manifestations, from “statisticulation”, the performance paradox, and evidence-based policy generated research to hermetic theoretical writing, suggesting the necessity to delineate ethically the manifestations tagged as bullshit from the accurate and rigorous cultural policy-making and research.

What seems to complicate the policy-making landscape, as Belfiore and Bennet (2010) also notice, is a parallel rise of evidence-based policy-making and the rise of inconsistencies, bullshitting, discursive mishmashes, and ambiguities in policy texts and actions which stand in stark contrast to the rational-comprehensive policy ideal. However, what unites these two policy-making trends is the idea of policy-making as a politically neutral exercise - whether by factual, technocratic, or rational use of research evidence and scientific knowledge (Wells 2007), in reality practised more as “policy-based evidence-making” (Belfiore and Bennett 2007), or by the lack of policy clarity that leaves space for numerous opposing interpretations, thus saying a lot without saying anything in particular. Ahearne also points out this depoliticising trend in policy when characterising policy-making as a product of the chaotic and mixed “policy primeval soup”, where all sorts of different policy solutions float together waiting to be fished back up by “policy entrepreneurs” when the right problems come along and require fixing (Ahearne 2006: 3).

While, in the post-political manoeuvre (Mouffe 2005; Rancière 2006), public dissensus and political disagreements are successfully side-tracked through both phenomena, we seem to lack the understanding of how policy-making is really taking place and “[w]e still know relatively little about the dynamics of the policy process” (Nutley and Webb 2000: 29). As Belfiore and Bennett observe, “the policy-making process *in reality* is more complicated than the [rational-comprehensive] model presumes” (original emphasis, 2010: 135). The rationalist-comprehensive policy model (Leoveanu 2013; Saint-Martin and Rothmayr 2011; Everett 2003) represents policy as a coherent

whole created through the clear cycle of decision-making, which presupposes thorough research, deliberation of values, and diverse policy alternatives, as well as consideration of input-output effectiveness. Despite the theoretical and symbolic dominance of a rational-comprehensive model as a sort of policy-making ideal and norm, doubts have been expressed since the 1950s on the possibility of exercising this model in real-life policy processes (Lindblom 1959). In light of increased globalisation, overlapping of different policy levels and rationales (local, national, supranational, global), increased intersectoral influences and new actors in the policy-making field, the coherences of policies, as well as the straightforward relation between the policy texts and actions, seem ever harder to achieve.

How can we then give meaning to ambiguous, incoherent, inaccurate and polysemous policies? And, more importantly, how can we understand the complex, multi-layered, and even chaotic processes within cultural policy-making? This is a burdening question for the whole of cultural policy studies, that tackles not only the issue of the ethical and political position of policy-makers and researchers, but, more broadly, a range of epistemological and ontological issues. In trying to account for complexities, blurriness, inconsistencies, and diverse rationales of policy-making, we find the theorising of contingency in policy and politics particularly fruitful for cultural policy research. This is because the idea of contingency challenges the very nature of reality, as well as our ways of knowing about it, changing both the ontological and epistemological rules of the game and producing a direct clash with the positivistic study of politics (Shapiro 2007), which is at the centre of sustaining the idea of linear rational policy-making.

In defining the coordinates of contingency as a concept, Schedler (2007) treats it as a three-dimensional concept that involves indeterminacy (meaning that  $x$  could be different and that there are numerous possible worlds), uncertainty ( $x$  is unpredictable, futures are open), and conditionality (causal justifications in which  $x$  depends on  $y$ ). On a broader scale, seeing politics and policy as contingent means understanding the world as evolving and having multiple possibilities and potential realities which are not controllable even by the most established structures, procedures, and projections that the rational mind can set. In fact, apart from structures, policy texts and normative procedures, there is the whole jungle of competing discourses, messy processes, games of everyday

politics, and agencies of individual actors, as well as surprising events and occurrences that can influence the course and outcomes of policies.

In short, politics and policy is a part of, influenced by, and influences “the multifaceted plurality of contingencies that inhabit the public sphere” (Schedler 2007: 74) that should be grasped by the study of politics. Without this, there is little space for encompassing complexities of policy-making in practice. In other words, if one wants to understand the more nuanced reality of policy-making, one needs to take into account all the ways that policy diverges from the norms, as well as illogical, accidental and indeterminate policy practices.

### **Methodological considerations**

Issues that we have discussed so far are also related to methodological issues. Namely, if policy processes are always and necessarily multivocal, somewhat ambiguous, multi-layered, and contingent, taking only textual products of these processes as the only or primary source for research seems to be very problematic. Policy documents, as well as official, public speeches, are by far the most consensual, cleansed, and controlled products of policy-making. Behind and beside these outputs lays a wealth of authentic, confused, polysemic, socially unacceptable, personal, biased, interested, and partial ideas, thoughts, speeches, and texts that can inform policy research. We will go as far to say that the official policy texts as the primary object of study can even sometimes obscure the complexities of the actual messy reality of policy-making.

Nevertheless, textual analysis of policy documents and political speeches seems to be the usual choice of many researchers in policy studies. Calling for a more interpretative and complex research design, Yanow (drawing from Burke) claims that apart from *actors*, their *acts*, and their *motivations*, research needs to also take into account *agency* (“how they did what they did”), *scene* (“the setting for these acts”), and *audience* (2007: 117). Many of these are impossible to grasp without field study encompassing a range of qualitative research methods. This is why for this research, we have used a multi-method research design which encompasses textual analysis, interviewing, and participant observation.

The object of our analysis is the case of the city of Novi Sad and the policy processes that led to it winning the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) title for the year 2021

(NS2021). It was a five-year process (from 2011 to 2016) in which local, national, and European levels of policy-making overlapped and collided. It was also a case in which public, private, and civil, as well as professional and lay actors all took the decision-making stage in asymmetrical and often conflictual ways. All these complexities were finally pacified and fixed within one policy document - the application form, better known as the Bidbook. It is a document submitted by a candidate city in response to a call for ECoC, in which a city sets out its objectives, developmental vision, and artistic programme, as well as concrete action steps, management processes, financial provisions, and evaluation indicators. Not only it is an application to ECoC that has to respond to a concrete set of questions that reflect specific policy ideas and criteria set by the European Union (EU 2014), but is a four year long contract between the EU and the city that defines the visions for transforming the city via ECoC. This is a type of the strategic policy document that articulates the specific image and understanding of the city, alongside the vision, program streams, and actions to be achieved and ways of distributing material resources at their disposal in the next five or more years. Finally, it is a document which required significant financial and human resources by the public authorities and targeted work by many people, and is also the key basis on which the panel of European experts decided to give the title to the city. We take this important policy document and focus on the ways in which the document presents and projects the city's identity politics and cultural policies related to identities. In analysing this, we pay particular focus to ambiguities, conceptual inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and bullshitting existing throughout the Bidbook.

Apart from this text, we analyse NS2021 as a specific policy event (Mayhew 2007: 101) that created openings for new policies, for new accidental or deliberate relations among actors, and united or divided actors across the ideological spectrum. This is why, in trying to understand the complexities of the case of Novi Sad 2021, we applied additional research methods. After the Bidbook analysis, we conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with six key authors of the text, including the team coordinator, as well as the general manager of the ECoC and two foreign advisers who were part of the bidding process. The interviews were conducted in Serbian (or English, in the case of foreign advisers). Interviews were transcribed and coded by authors, who also did all the translations from Serbian

to English for parts of the interviews that will appear in the following text. All interviewees were promised anonymity, so their quotes will appear with aliases. Throughout the analysis, we will also offer fragments of historical background in order to understand the sedimented myths of Novi Sad, as well as the city's conflicted memories, which formed a particular "order of discourses" (Fairclough 1995) from which narratives within the Bidbook were chosen and built upon.

In addition, in analysing the whole process, we used a wealth of our personal experiences, perceptions, and memories of the candidacy process. While both of us have been following the events in Novi Sad, first co-author has been engaged by the city in the early phases of ECoC nomination (during 2014), as well as in the preparation of the cultural strategy of the city that ran in parallel to the writing of the Bidbook (in 2016). Hence, key players, events, and processes are familiar to us from the semi-insider perspective. Within the framework of the participant observation (Kawulich 2005; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011), we collected, archived, and analysed key events while they were happening, as well as *post factum*. The position of the first co-author could be best explained as "peripheral membership role" (Adler and Adler 1994: 380), while the second co-author played a more distant role, contributing to the reflexivity of the overall analysis. These personal involvements have served as additional data gathering sources. At the same time, these insights provided a way to check the credibility of the claims made by the interviewees.

All these factors helped us better understand the relations, personal positions, challenges, external pressures, and internal struggles in the process of creating the Bidbook. In addition, it also enabled us to take into account contingencies, specific events, turning points, and accidents behind such policy-making. In what follows, we first briefly introduce the case of NS2021, pinpointing the rupture that this process brought to the usual ways of conducting cultural policy in Novi Sad. We then analyse the Bidbook as a policy text, focusing on the inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and ambiguities of identity policies within the text. Then we look at the policy processes behind the Bidbook in order to understand what has influenced the creation of this text. Finally, we conclude by drawing implications of this case for the wider field of cultural policy research.

## Introducing the case of NS2021

In the autumn of 2011, after years of speculation and expectations, the parliament of Novi Sad, Serbia, declared that the city intended to become a candidate for the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) title. What followed was a series of presentations, discussions, working team constitutions and dissolutions, drafting of policy proposals, and research and consultations. All together, these efforts brought the title to the city in 2016, when the European Commission declared Novi Sad to be the ECOC for the 2021 (NS2021).

The whole process has introduced many changes to the city, most of all in the sphere of cultural policy-making. Before the ECOC nomination, local cultural policy was a peripheral, highly bureaucratised, yet not transparent policy field. Decisions were made without any underlying explicit strategic document. The participation of NGOs in policy-making was very low and informal, and inter-department collaboration (e.g. with education, urban planning, economy) was weak. Then, for the first time in its recent history (and for many aspects in the wider surrounding area), the city has gone through its first long-term cultural planning that involved field research, continuous consultations, and discussions that involved numerous stakeholders, especially the local cultural NGOs and experts. Foreign experts were engaged to propose changes to the ways cultural policy is run, and the local artistic council and working groups were formed to suggest changes and new directions. Furthermore, local, provincial, and national governments have been in a rare situation of jointly supporting a single project; various departments of the local government (culture, urbanism, social care, tourism, youth, finances, etc.) were obliged to work together within a single policy process; and a panel of independent experts nominated by the EU started overlooking the city's nomination process and the Bidbook, which in various ways also influenced local strategic cultural planning.

This rupture in the habit of policy-making meant that the local cultural policy dynamics became significantly more complex - from a rather marginal field of policy run by several elected and permanent city officials, it has developed into a process that involved hundreds of actors. A particularly relevant difference is that policy-making processes at the local and national level were confronted with the EU policy-making procedures, expectations, and ideals. In many local discussions



and decisions, the idea that “the EU is now watching us” - regardless of the actual evaluation and monitoring procedures by the designated panel of experts - increased expectations and created a different policy-making environment. Similar to many other non-Western European ECoCs (Lähdesmäki 2014), this watchful eye from the West was particularly important because of Serbia’s semi-peripheral geopolitical position (Spasić 2013) and the status of candidate country for EU membership, which meant that there was a heightened need to perform as “developed”, “modern”, and “European”.

### **Reading the Bidbook**

The analytical eye, when reading just the first few introductory pages of the NS2021 Bidbook, could notice that there are diverse elements that alone, or in relation to each other, offer ambiguous, overstated, and conflicting views on the city, its motives to be the European Capital of Culture, its vision of cultural development, and related policies and means of achieving this. If we understand the application to the ECoC as a policy text that is supposed to give a certain strategic direction to the cultural policy and production of a given city, then we are faced with the rich menu of concepts, policy priorities, streams of actions, projects, measures, and indicators. This assemblage of mutually competing ideas poses challenges to any policy maker, cultural producer or researcher who would aim to follow directions suggested in the NS2021 Bidbook. At the same time, such incoherent policy text makes it challenging to hold the ECoC team and city administration responsible for the future implementation of the policy.

First of all, the document is not always *accurate*. It is teeming with overemphasised, grandiose statements. For example, the city is presented in the very opening paragraph as “a tolerant, multinational, multi-confessional and multicultural community”, that in “a time of migration and conflict, would like to offer Europe the experience of 21 ethnic communities who live here in harmony” (NS2021 2016, part 0: 2). What is absent from the text, however, is that the city has been increasingly ethnically homogenised in the course of the twentieth century. While in 1910, 41.08% of population was Serbian, a century later, in 2011, 78.68% were Serbian. Moreover, many of these 21 communities, even the largest ones, have faced very difficult times in the city over the last decades (Pavković 2001). As an illustration, while in 1961 there were 23,812 Hungarians who made up 23.24% of the

population (the second largest community after Serbs), half a century later, in 2011, there were 13,272 Hungarians, or as little as 3.88% (SZS 1994; SZS 2012). Similarly, Bidbook claims that the city is a “Sustainable Babylon on the Danube” which is a very misleading claim. Apart from the official use of four languages, it is very hard to spot any public use of other languages than Serbian and English across the city. Moreover, this multilingual character of the city is not further elaborated or backed up by any evidence in the Bidbook, like existing programmes, events, or publications. Although one could claim that in this case we see a “bullshitting act”, what we find important is also some wider, structural and contextual reasons for the deployment of this text that considerably challenge the image of deliberate manipulation and a clear responsibility of the authors - something we will deal with in the latter part of the paper.

Second, the text of the Bidbook is incoherent, meaning that it does not offer a stable and clear policy direction. The document floats between mutually exclusive and contradictory identity policies of multiculturalism, interculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and nationalism. Authors, for example, state that Novi Sad has a “spirit of cooperation and creativity permeating life that is multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-confessional” (NS2021 2016 part 0: 4), which is obviously promoting ethnic and cultural diversity. Nevertheless, despite the opening statement, nationalism appears in diverse sections of the text. The authors celebrate national unity with the statements like: “in the 19th century Novi Sad boasted the attributes of a leading institutional seat and creative wellspring of Serbian national culture” (NS2021 2016, part 0: 4). Moreover, referring to the wider geographic area included in the ECoC (“Zone 021”), we discover that Sremski Karlovci, a small neighbouring town that could easily claim as multicultural a history and presence of diverse ethnic communities as Novi Sad, is presented solely as the birthplace of the Serbian national awareness of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Finally, even though multiculturalism is presented as a proud characteristic of Novi Sad, we never find any reasonable narrative about the “21 communities” that live in Novi Sad - who they are, their social status and cultural rights, their interactions and relations, their perspectives on the city and the issues they face, or their representation in the cultural infrastructure and programing. Unlike the historic references to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Serbian national awareness, we cannot find any historical narrative that would actually present ethnicities other than Serbian in a respectful manner.

It is, of course, not problematic to mention that the city had its multicultural aspects and eras, as well as its experiences of nationalism. However, a coherent document entails that one cannot simultaneously promote nationalism and multiculturalism, or multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue. When Gray (2015) refers to *ambiguity* in cultural policy, he defines it as a text or action that is so nonspecific and vague that actors can attach different meanings to the same claim. Here, we see the different strategy of creating *too many* claims and policy actions. Still, the end result is similar: the text floats in many possible directions, making it possible for the readers of diverse backgrounds and political options to choose statements and actions that they find appropriate.

Finally, the Bidbook is inconsistent, meaning that parts of the text are not in accordance with one another. Most importantly, proposed actions and projects are not consistent with policy goals and values set out in the beginning of the text. Even though references to interculturalism abound in the conceptual chapters, proposed projects rarely fit intercultural agenda. In the section where intercultural projects are presented, we can read about residencies for artists from other European countries (NS2021 2016, part 2: 2); about project *Hakać* that aims to preserve (Serbian) Cyrillic script via Hackatons - gatherings where programmers collaboratively code in the form of the marathon (NS2021 2016, part 2: 2); or one of the flagship intercultural projects, *Moba for Heritage*, in which “a German, a Hungarian, a Slovak, a Romanian and a Serbian house would be renovated thus contributing to enhanced social cohesion and intercultural cooperation” (NS2021 2016, part 2: 3). In cultural policy literature, interculturalism is all about crossing cultural boundaries, communication, dialogue, and loosening the grip of fixed identities and strict patterns of belonging (see CoE 2008; Meer and Modood 2011). However, the projects mentioned in the Bidbook either enhance the tradition of the dominant culture, foster international relations, or, in the last case, promote the pastoral, fixed representation of equally fixed ethnic communities through vernacular heritage or theatre. Attention is not devoted to dialogue, sharing, or building intercultural competence. Moreover, other non-ethnic communities and minorities in the city are completely missing from the picture, which is very characteristic of multiculturalist discourses in opposition to interculturalism (CoE 2008). Furthermore, the actual low importance of intercultural dialogue is seen in the list of the 18 long-term impacts of the ECoC, where

only one mentions identity issues, diverse communities, and intercultural dialogue (NS2021 2016, part 1: 6). Similar is the case with the monitoring indicators, as only 4 out of 68 reflect in some way cultural identity policies, though mainly referring to the number of participants from and programmes developed with different ethnic communities (NS2021 2016, part 1: 10-12).

### **Policy dynamics beyond the Bidbook**

We have seen that the Bidbook could be characterised as problematic if we check its coherency, accuracy, and consistency. This is largely in line with already-cited analysis of numerous cultural policy texts. However, what interests us is to further explore how and why such a text evolved. Was it a deliberate choice of the authors or was it structural determinants that produced this text? Are authors aware of these inconsistencies and do they agree with this characterisation of the text? We will ground our answers to these and other questions in numerous discussions with authors of the text, as well as with experts who have knowledge of other similar texts (ECoC bids). In what follows, we look at the historical narratives, political context, external pressures, internal dynamics, challenges and events that have, according to our field research, shaped the policy-making related to ECoC Novi Sad 2021 and influenced the production of the Bidbook. In presenting these various aspects, we will discuss what each of them might mean for understanding particular policy-making processes and policy texts.

#### Existing discursive landscape

When analysing a policy text which refers to a certain history and/or the current state, we need to notice the existing discursive landscape from which authors – whether consciously or unconsciously – borrow *discursive materials* to construct their text. As many authors in discourse theory claim, discourses are more *available* within the existing “order of discourse”, and that partly determines their use (see Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Laclau 1990). This is similar to what Ahearne (2006: 3) suggests when characterising policy-making as a consequence of fishing from a “policy primeval soup”, where all sorts of different policy solutions (and discourses) float together, waiting to be used depending on a situation. In Novi Sad, as in any other city, different, competing and contradictory discourses about the city exist within the political field. The

question “what is Novi Sad?” is open-ended.

As we mentioned before, this is particularly true when it comes to two clashing but highly credible identity discourses that explain the city: the Serbian national discourse and the multicultural discourse. Both are built on strong factual “proof” from particular historic periods and have been called upon and rearticulated numerous times in the history of the city. Their continuous revival has to do with the way in which the political elites of Novi Sad have treated cultural diversity and have conducted identity policies, using these historic discourses to present certain political choices as obvious. Multicultural policies have therefore often been opposed by nationalist policies, only to be replaced by the former, and so on. Multicultural policies and narratives were first installed during the reign of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as for the period of Socialist Yugoslavia when Novi Sad was the poster child of multicultural policies. The national image of Novi Sad as “Serbian Athens”, formed during the nineteenth century with the rising national awareness of the Serbian population, was fostered both during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. This narrative, as well as nationalistic policies, came their prominence again during the 1990s, encouraged by the increased ethno-nationalism that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, as well as by the large influx of Serb refugees from Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. This not only changed the demographic situation, but also pushed many minorities to the margins, discouraging them from participation in public life (Pavković 2001).

However, we often face the situation in which the same administration or political option simultaneously supports nationalist and multiculturalist, supranational (like EU) or cosmopolitan policies in various situations, as seems appropriate. In fact, the early ECoC candidacy phase was stained by such inconsistency taken to the extreme. Namely, the manager of the early candidacy team from 2013-2014, coming from a small far-right party “Third Serbia”, in another public duty of his as the director of the Cultural Centre of Novi Sad, censored an exhibition of local arts students on the ground of defending the religious sentiments of local citizens - a move that was met with the fury of the most artistic circles in the city. This was, however, not just his personal move. His party has been known as an aggressive promoter of supposedly endangered Serbian cultural traditions and a vocal supporter of

the ECOc bid together with its cultural diversity, “Europeanness” and international aspects.

Knowing all this, the authors of the Bidbook should not be too easily credited with inventing conflicting identity discourses about the city, nor the policy inconsistency related to it. They have used and referred to available discursive and policy options both when it comes to telling the history of the city and proposing policy measures. Moreover, our interviews reveal that in many cases, this inconsistency in the Bidbook is not a manipulative rhetorical act, nor a form of deliberate ambiguity in which texts are chosen to please various audiences. In the case of this ambiguity, most of the authors understand these two proposed policy threads - nationalist and multiculturalist - as relevant and present - as something normal. The foreign member of the team (Sergei) stated in the defence of the Bidbook: “Yes, these two positions exist in Serbian society” (Interview with foreign expert, November 4, 2017), while Predrag, one of the local authors said: “we have just put in things already recognized by the people”. Hence, they see no reason for denouncing their simultaneous use. At the same time, another part of the team claims that their presence is a mere outcome of the lack of focus and time. Igor told us: “I see it as an oversight. There was simply no one who would go through the whole text [in the end] and control these aspects” (Interview with local expert, November 6, 2016). In both cases, the obvious presence of these discourses in public life prevented deeper reflection. Normalised as they are, it requires an analytic effort to see the problem in their parallel use.

If we now return to the notion of “bullshitting”, it is important to notice a problematic degree of voluntarism and individualism in this concept. While both Frankfurt (2005) and Belfiore (2009) understand the act of bullshitting primarily as the responsibility and action of a “bullshitter”, the collective, structural, and cultural component is completely left out of the picture. What we can see in this example is that inconsistencies (just like overstatements and misrepresentations) often happen unconsciously, when sedimented discourses, historical narratives, or common knowledge, are repeated and appropriated uncritically. It is these sedimented (and rarely questioned) common narratives, and not only the personal interests or political agendas, that seems to have fostered the use of overstatements, inaccuracies, and competing discourses within NS2021 Bidbook.

## Requirements by the EU

Besides the particular availability and credibility of chosen discourses, it is also policy genre - such as the ECoC nomination - that influences the choice of the discursive repertoire and structures the way policy is articulated, thus limiting the individual and group agency of policy-makers. Unlike many policy texts, ECoC Bidbooks begin as a response to the call for applications based on six criteria for the selection (EU 2014). Hence, much of their content, and consequently much of their policy directions, is defined not solely by the policy-maker, but by the EU Commission (EC), which (despite a marginal financial contribution of 1.5 million EUR out of a budget of 30 million EUR), has a serious impact on the final document and corresponding policy. Setting a list of questions for cities to answer, the EC in their guidelines for the evaluation push cities into achieving all sorts of goals, although they are sometimes unattainable and contradicting. For example, among the main criteria for evaluation, one has to devote attention both to local non-audiences ("the creation of new and sustainable opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural activities, in particular young people, volunteers and the marginalised and disadvantaged, including minorities", EU 2017, criteria D), as well as to international, European audiences "attract the interest of a broad European and international public" (EU 2017, criteria C). Similarly, one is expected to have "a clear and coherent artistic vision and strategy for the cultural programme" (EU 2017, criteria B) and, on the other hand, show "the involvement of the local population and civil society in the preparation of the application and the implementation of the action" (EU 2017, criteria D), implying the inclusion of heterogeneous artistic and cultural tastes and differing political stances. Thus, the contradictions in the Bidbook can be partially ascribed to the prerequisites of the title itself. This is something that authors also felt. The general manager, for example, stated that his main fear is that there are too many priorities set out by the Bidbook and that the focus of the efforts will therefore be dispersed.

The identity and diversity issues have an outstanding prominence throughout the candidacy process. The criteria for evaluation and a set of questions posed by the EC within the Bidbook (EU 2017, criteria C) suggest a high value placed on presenting cities' "Europeanness" by showing the city to be open and culturally diverse, if not multicultural, and foreseeing

policies and actions that are intercultural. As Ivan, one of the authors, explained, they have perceived this as the rule of the game: "You know, each city that decides to be the candidate for the ECoC is a multicultural city and is proud of that, and it is usually those cities that win the candidacy", (Interview with local expert, October 26, 2017). Therefore, the authors' choice to highlight the multicultural discourse as a particular feature of Novi Sad was guided by the expectations for the candidate city, as well as previous ECoC Bidbooks.

The ECoC Bidbook should therefore be understood as a specific policy genre which sets particular expectations and calls for the search of particular available discourses. Furthermore, the existence of this genre makes it desirable for the authors to start from what is already known, written, and accepted as appropriate in other similar cases within the genre, i.e. other Bidbooks and official EU narratives on culture. The following quote from Igor is illustrative of that formative effect of the ECoC (Interview with local expert, November 6, 2017):

*I think that most Bidbooks suffer from the same affliction, and ours has suffered the same. Too much referencing on each others' Bidbooks, taking methodologies from one another... In such a short time frame, you can't manage to truly deal with the very foundations, and therefore you look at the ways to satisfy the form that Bidbook represents.*

This is further normalised by the practice of employing particular foreign experts and consultants who have worked on the previous ECoCs as guides through the dark - they know the right words, the Commission's desires, and the tricks of the trade. In this situation, there is very narrow space for starting from the scratch in rethinking the candidacy process and writing the Bidbook. The ECoC, even though it has its specificities, is not at all an exception in the mannerism of policy-making. The policy field is abundant with diverse genres within which discourses and policy options get re-appropriated, recycled, reframed, and reshaped in the production of a specific policy text.

The pressure of becoming the ECoC

In addition to being a particular policy genre, the ECoC is also a particular policy event, which ruptures habitual ways of policy-making and produces new dynamics among diverse actors.



According to what Mayhew suggests (2007) in his call for taking account of events in political science, we can understand the ECoC as a type of event which sets the stage for new reordering of meanings, values, and relations. When such events happen, they push relevant stakeholders to assume and negotiate their positions, (re)articulate their interpretations, and influence and pressure their surroundings in desired ways. It is important to understand these dynamics if we want to analyse the making of a document which is in fact at the very nexus of all these relations.

In the case of Novi Sad, the symbolic weight of becoming the ECoC was deeply entangled with the issue of the European identity of the city – an identity that is desired but troublesome for two reasons. First, as with other cities in Serbia, an EU candidate country on the margins of the “developed Europe”, there is a noticeable effort by policy-makers to claim their European status. Second, Novi Sad claims its high position in the cultural hierarchy of Serbian cities precisely on the idea of it being more European than many other (a claim that is partially based on the fact that Novi Sad, until a century ago, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and thus, according to the symbolic geography of the Balkans, more European, civilised, and cultural than the cities in Serbia south of the Danube that belonged to the Ottoman Empire). Therefore, it was highly desirable finally to get an additional validation of being European. As Ivan, one of the authors, admitted: “It was hard to write about the European dimension of the candidacy, especially with the metaphor of bridges and 1999 [NATO alliance destroyed all bridges in the city, yet “4 new bridges is a title of the candidacy], however, we wanted to present this strong will to be a part of EU, part of the European milieu” (Interview with local expert, October 24, 2017). The pressure of the desire for the “European stamp” was silently felt all along this process.

Because of this symbolic weight of becoming the ECoC, unlike many other ECoC candidates around Europe, there was no official political opposition to the initiative. The candidacy was first mentioned by the ruling right-wing party in 2008, and then the candidacy was officially announced by the centrist party in 2011. After that, from 2012 to late 2014, it was led by the far-right party and finally, since the spring of 2015, managed and won by the centre-right party, which is the period when the work on the first version of the Bidbook began. However, the very fact that the candidacy was supported by all these regimes meant that many citizens understood it as an obvious sign that

there is something very wrong with the whole endeavour. Many saw it as a potential for corruption and a way to divert attention from more problematic social and political issues. Moreover, similar to other Eastern European cities (Lähdesmäki 2014), many citizens felt that the city simply does not deserve the title because of the infrastructural, socio-economic, and political problems in the city. This lack of trust affected the team in such a way that it became additionally important to show that it was possible to implement the bidding process for the ECoC.

Moreover, since the project was, from its start, presented and promoted by various political parties, often with dubious reputation, much opposition came from independent artistic circles. For many artists and cultural workers, the scandal with the aforementioned censorship of an exhibition by the director of the Cultural Centre of Novi Sad and general manager of the ECoC candidacy resulted in public protests and the boycott of not only the Cultural Centre, but also of the ECoC candidacy process. The choice of the second managing director was another tipping point for many, since he came from the top management of the EXIT festival, viewed by many in the artistic circles as the leader of the “festivalisation” and commercialisation of cultural production in the city. In the spirit of dissatisfaction, some local media even published as a headline, without any evidence, that “EXIT has taken over the ECoC candidacy” (O21.rs 2015). Finally, due to the size of the project, as well as the high expectations that it carried, many actors who should have participated were not ready to take responsibility for it. Many directors of public institutions, leaders of NGOs, and political leaders looked for ways to mitigate their role in the making of the application, especially before the first signals of possible success reached the public.

All this meant that the ECoC team, according to their own experiences, and when considered from a distance, worked in tensions with many groups who were essential for the successful bid. The distancing by many culture professionals and the suspicion of media and the wider public influenced the creation of the team itself, which further shaped the text and set limits to what could be achieved. These pressures and social dynamics underline the fact that no process of policy-making happens in a vacuum, especially in the case of policy events that shake up the usual ways of doing things and change previous positions and relations among social actors - as is the case with the ECoC. Moreover, this also implies that no policy text should be read as if it was created outside of contextual

struggles, since these pressures, expectations, and struggles shape the very production of a policy text.

#### Lack of time, competence and deliberation within the team

Talking about pressures, our interviewees all pointed to the pressures stemming from the lack of time, legitimacy, and competence. In December 2015, after the pre-selection process, Novi Sad was invited by the European Commission to submit a final application (the Bidbook) by the 9th September 2016. However, because of slow administration and lack of specific administrative knowledge, as well as the fact that the final version of the application had very little in common with the first one (due to the critique by the panel), the time left to construct the programme and the Bidbook was fairly short. It lasted from February 2016 until July of 2016, when the final editing, layout, and design of the document started.

Consequently, many decisions were made in a hurry and many solutions were justified by this deficit. Moreover, general lack of knowledge on how to run the ECoC candidacy was further aggravated by the lack of specific cultural policy and management knowledge within the team, as well as inside main cultural institutions and the city directorate for culture, who were to be the main carriers of the application. Because of the wide boycott of the ECoC expressed by many in the cultural scene, many professionals who were invited to participate refused to do so in the earlier stages of the bidding process. The general manager recalled his tough decision to join the team and said that the candidacy was a “hot potato”. Another member of the team whom we interviewed said that it was rather strange for him not to see more people with genuine knowledge of cultural policy and management in the team.

As a consequence, none of the persons from the management team and majority of the Bidbook team had formal education in fields related to culture and the arts. This is why several members of the Bidbook team mentioned that the deficiency of knowledge in running international cultural projects of that kind was felt throughout the process. While explaining one of the pivotal events for the creation of the concept, Igor, one of the interviewed authors, stated that due to the such constraints, unsatisfactory decisions had to be made (Interview with local expert, November 6, 2017):

*All that was so short, and on the other hand, I can't say that I didn't expect much bigger engagement of some people from the field of cultural policy and cultural management. [...] Now, when you are in a situation of not having experience with that kind of endeavours, many things get accepted.*

Furthermore, in the directorate, the situation was even worse, with all of the members having a legal background and having practically no knowledge of international and EU cultural projects and policies. Much of the decisions were made in the light of this lack of time and knowledge, which means that decisions were made *ad hoc* without proper planning procedures. This is what Kikaš (2017) has referred to as “cultural planning in random” in the case of the Croatian ECoC candidates.

The external pressures, in combination with the lack of time, meant that even the narrowest team, not to mention the wider community, did not deliberate enough on key concepts during the writing of the text. While being challenged with some of the inconsistencies of the text that we highlighted above, Sergei, a foreign member of the team, stated: “Well, simply no one raised the question”. Even the questions that cropped up along the way were often side-lined. This is how Jelena explained it: “We arrived at the moment when there was really not time to go deeper in developing basic concepts” (Interview with local expert, October 26, 2017). As a group that was challenged and pressured by many, the group tried to bypass conflicts within itself. The feeling was that there was no time for conflict resolutions, and hence, tensions stayed implicit. This lack of reflection and deliberation further undermined the capacity of the team to bring inconsistencies to the fore and initiate a process of thorough conceptualisation needed to make a coherent policy programme.

All the deficits mentioned by the team are not an exception to the usual policy-making process, which often happens within short time-frames, with scarce resources, with lack of competence, and marginal deliberation. As early as 1959, Lindblom put forward the idea of the “incremental” or “successive limited method” of policy-making. Unlike the ends-means policy, in which a public administrator sets out to compare a large number of alternative policy measures and their benefits, starting from the fundamental political foundations and following a strict, comprehensive, rational methods preached in the majority of the academic literature,

Lindblom notes that most policy makers compare a limited number of available alternatives following the decisions made by their predecessors, without ever discussing and agreeing upon the best process to achieve the ends. Accordingly, he notes that because the first approach is impossible to follow because of the time and vast competence it requires, the successive limited method offers the option to “smuggle through” and escape the confrontations implied in particular policies. In this situation, one instead makes a small step forward, trying to work with what already exists within the existing policy landscape.

Having that in mind, in the case of Novi Sad, it would be optimistic to expect that a small team with no previous experience of writing the Bidbook, with limited time and authority within the cultural sector, and without political decision-making power would set out to thoroughly rethink the cultural field and cultural policies of a city. The obvious option was therefore to rely on the consensus and to avoid conflicts. In doing this, the group relied on the genre of the ECoC Bidbook, the existing discourses about Novi Sad, and the multiplicity of diverse policy options inspired by both the EU, national and local policy ideals.

### Multi-authorship

A wide range of local policy priorities and the request for the wide involvement of stakeholders set by the EC panel set the stage for a very complex policy-making process. In order to solve the aforementioned problem of professional legitimacy, the team included reputable individuals from the cultural field in the Art Council and engaged foreign consultants, with a great deal of confidence. Furthermore, in the final stages of the candidacy process, a great number and range of organisations from the city contributed with their ideas and programmes to the Bidbook (in total, more than 300 projects were sent in response to the open call), which improved the overall trust towards the candidacy project. However, this diversity made work very challenging. As Jelena, one of the Bidbook authors stated, “to fit into the Bidbook all those vanities and so called experts, within such a limited timeframe and page limits - that was the biggest challenge” (Interview with local expert, October 25, 2017). All this inevitably produced a multi-authored work, and as time passed, fewer and fewer people actually knew why certain proposals ended up in the text. This problem of

multi-authorship and contradicting agendas of numerous actors has already been noticed in cultural policy research. Analysing the case of United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, Pyykkönen (2012) argued that policy texts are necessarily complex and potentially contradictory, because they come as a result of multi-authorship and multiple agendas. Although there are many differences between a UNESCO convention and a local ECoC application, the common points of multi-authorship guide us to the conclusion that drafting processes that involve multiple agendas and authors make simple and coherent analysis very hard, if not impossible.

#### Beyond certainty - accidents, agencies, and surprises

The reasons behind the complexity of such a text go even further and include not only complexities and multiplicities, but also a series of contingent, accidental occurrences that are difficult to explain rationally. In one of the crucial events for the creation of the main concept of the Bidbook (the one of “4 New Bridges”), foreign consultants from the Czech Republic, France, and Hungary came to the meeting with the local team (some of them for the first time). As the local team presented their idea of bicycles, consultants were not satisfied and proposed instead that the team take some symbol of the city that would be more familiar to the international community, like the symbol of bombarded and rebuilt bridges. Even though the consultants who made the proposal did so in a brainstorming manner, without much attachment to the idea, and despite the fact that the idea was considered “lame” by many local members of the team, the idea was accepted the very same day, without much discussion. The speed of acceptance surprised almost everyone. Igor, one of participants in the meeting, told us in the interview: “no one can actually explain why that happened, it just did” (Interview with local expert, November 4, 2017). Even foreign experts were surprised: “I was astonished”, John explained - “the things went for me too quick in decision-making. I think that most of these things require more time” (Interview with foreign expert, December 6, 2017). The fact is that in the whole atmosphere of rush and danger of failure, the general manager thought that decisions had to be made quickly and that opening up the complicated and lengthy debate would be a potential loss of time and would undermine the legitimacy

of the process. As he explained: “No one wanted to take the responsibility [for new solution] and the time was running. So, I had to step in and take the initiative” (Interview with general manager, October 27, 2017).

That was not the only event which participants of the process themselves felt happened in an unexpected manner. The recruitment of main team members happened in a way that is hard to understand. For most of the positions, no public call was made announcing determined selection procedures. In this situation and in the current political context of Serbia, one could expect party members and loyal people to take the places on the team; however, that was not the case as far as our knowledge extends. Some of the members simply asked someone they knew in the team if they could be part of it, while others were invited on a collegial and friendly basis. This is precisely how one of us was accepted in the early Bidbook team in 2014 with the comment “we need all the help we can get”. The same happened with the members of the artistic council and programme board. With so many questions being opened and abilities needed, pretty much anyone willing to take part was accepted. This, however, created an atmosphere in which chaos and accidents could easily take hold, because even the main participants did not share the basic ideas of what the ECoC should be about.

Here we see that some events that shape policy are logically very inaccessible: they are hard to understand both for participants of the event and for external analysts. Theorising them and framing them into simple explanatory mechanisms is thus very problematic and any such endeavour can end in reductionism and oversimplification. For policy makers, this is often not of particular relevance. The policy-making process goes on, new challenges are faced, and new decisions made with what is accessible. However, for a (cultural) policy study, these events trigger very important epistemological questions. At what cost of losing the nuances, complexities, and details should a comprehensive theory of such a messy reality be made? Can we equate textual outcome of the policy process (such as policy text or speech) with the policy process as such? Finally, can we offer normative claims about particular policy texts based on the simple analysis of the text itself and evaluate it according to the implicit policy-making norm? To answer these and similar questions would go beyond the scope of this text, however, we will deal with some of them in the concluding section.

## Dealing with complexities in cultural policy analysis

What we have suggested, while pinpointing different aspects of policy-making in Novi Sad ECoC 2021, is that practices of creating a policy are much more polysemic, negotiating, fluid, and contingent than what is often recognised by the rational policy ideal. If we analyse the policy texts in comparison to this theoretical ideal, we fail in our attempt to acknowledge the contexts, sedimented discourses, motives, and interests, reasoning and negotiations, pressures, accidental changes and compromises, and the agencies of individual actors involved, as well as structural support or limitations behind policy texts. In short, we fail to understand a policy reality in its complexity.

Recognising this, and going back to the question of textual inconsistencies, ambiguities, and “bullshitting”, we do not want to make the claim that all these phenomena are a straightforward and unavoidable outcome of actual policy processes, nor that there is no manipulative side to such claims. However, what we want to posit is that if the understanding of the political reality is the goal, one will not get far if we simply discredit and invalidate a text based on the comparison with the (often implicit) norms of the rationalist comprehensive policy-making model, which project an image of policy-making as a rational, consensual, linear, and coherent process of deliberation which ends with documents and measures of the same quality. In our view, the content of these incoherent processes is not some sort of black hole, lies, or a fake political moral, nor is it claptrap. Instead, we suggest that the inconsistencies, ambiguities, and “bullshitting” form a mirror image of dynamics, processes, and relations in the policy field, as well as the content that shapes and creates cultural policy in a particular context. As such, they help us better understand the policies we are aiming to research.

In the climate of increased complexity of globalised policy-making, in which numerous different actors, policy frameworks, contexts, and assumptions meet, we find it important for the cultural policy researchers to recognise the limitations of the positivist study of politics and question the very epistemological position, as well as the imagined norms of policy-making, on which cultural policy research relies. This goes well beyond the scope of this particular text. However, this text is an invitation to dig deeper into the manifestations in cultural policies that fall outside of the ordinary, as well as go beyond the textual analysis using other types of inquiries



that take into consideration the historical, contextual, and structural aspects, as well as the ruptures, the external and internal pressures, individual agencies, and accidents that shape the process of policy-making.

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